

Warning Against Worldliness – Part 1

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – James instructs his audience to avoid worldly passions while walking in faith
2. aim – to cause us to put aside worldly passions and strive for true humility before God and others
3. passage – James 4:1-12

b. outline

1. The Cause of Worldliness (James 4:1-3)
2. The Condemnation of Worldliness (James 4:4-6)
3. The Cure for Worldliness (James 4:7-12)

c. opening

1. the reality of **unhealthy churches**
 - a. **truth:** there is no such thing as a “perfect” church – although there are churches that are *healthy* (in general; e.g. GFBC), there are many that are *not* healthy and are characterized by *strife*
 1. in the N.T.: Philippi, strife between two women; Thessalonica, eschatological strife; Ephesus, struggled with false teachers; Galatia, soteriological strife; Corinth, strife of every kind; etc.
 - b. **truth:** as long as there are sinful people in the church, the church will struggle with *strife*
 1. the old ministerial adage: the church would be great, if it wasn't for the people ...
 2. **God has purposed, for his own glory, to not jump believers directly from justification to glorification – sanctification is an essential element of his plan over the elect**
 - a. the work of the Spirit, the Word, the ordinances, and the church *in this world* are essential to the fullest sense of God being *glorified through and in us*
 - b. so, *even in 45AD* (i.e. only about a decade after Christ), James writes to churches filled with *still-sinful people* struggling with the various connections of faith to life, of **sanctification**
2. the nature of the **second half of the letter**
 - a. **chaps. 1-2** = the great problem – the *definition* of faith (i.e. what is genuine saving faith?)
 - b. **chaps. 3-5** = the resulting problems – the *transformation* of faith (i.e. what are the works of faith?)
 1. the nature of *language* – the work of faith being to speak *consistently* from our nature as those born-again by the Spirit – **faith = transformed language**
 2. the nature of *wisdom* – the work of faith in *applying* what has been revealed to us *over against the way that the world thinks* – **faith = transformed understanding**
 3. (**now**) the nature of *desire* – the work of faith in which our *desires* in this world are conformed to the will of God in all things – **faith = transformed desires**

I. The Cause of Worldliness (James 4:1-3)

Content

a. the question of strife (v. 1a)

1. the question posed – a **rhetorical** question designed (**again!**) to raise an issue
 - a. a common approach: ask a question that solidifies a truth (e.g. see 3:13; who are the wise and understanding amongst you = aren't you all supposed to be wise?)
 1. “*quarrels*” = wars; battles; fights (verbal) – “*fights*” = clashes; conflicts; disputes (physical)
 2. i.e. verbal clashes vs. physical ones – not “fist fights” in the hallway, but other, more *passive-aggressive*, forms of physical clashing (e.g. withdrawal, avoidance, slandering, etc.)
 - b. **question:** what is this question *targeted at*, something real or something hypothetical?
 1. **IOW:** is James targeting a “theoretical” issue or a *real one*, and is this an issue *in the church*?
 - a. i.e. do you *have* conflicts in your church? or, *why are there* conflicts in your church?
 2. **answer:** the question *clearly* targets the reality that quarrels and fights *do happen* in the church, *even amongst those reading the letter who claim to have faith in Christ*
 - a. **note #1:** the use of the *interrogative* adverb “*what causes*” is repeated before *both* verbs, implying that James was *striking* this question (i.e. where does this come from?)
 - b. **note #2:** the use of the phrase “*among you*” clearly focuses the scope of the question to *within the church* (i.e. as an issue *amongst* believers)
 - c. **IOW:** James asks a *question* about conflict in the church **because he knows it exists**
 1. **perhaps he is aware of conflict even in his own church?**

2. **thesis: everyone who claims faith in Christ must be guided by a sense of humility and self-sacrifice, a transformation of our base desires which permeates our conduct, especially in our interpersonal relationships with others who might see the world differently**
 - a. **the work of faith in what we desire in this world (like speaking and understanding)**
- b. the source of strife: worldliness (v. 1b)**
 1. James suggests an answer to his own question:
 - a. “*is it not this ...*” = you would agree with me, wouldn’t you ... ?
 1. **IOW:** James believes there is an answer, but **(as we will see) the answer is not obvious**
 2. James does not blame strife in the church on external conflicts or external issues
 - a. the opinions of individuals re: every imaginable *outward* thing – 50 people = 50 different opinions
 1. **e.g.** everything that causes church “splits”: worship styles, music choices, sermon lengths or styles, use of money, leadership methodology, politics, paint colors, etc.
 - b. our assumption is that conflict is *external* to us – that our opinions and tastes and desires *are perfectly legitimate*, therefore the “genesis” of all conflict *must be outside of us*
 1. **i.e.** the natural tendency of human beings to *deny* their own fallenness
 2. **e.g.** the current cultural focus on “racism” assumes that the issue is “systemic,” in the very fabric of our culture; something inherent in the cultural milieu of an American ideology – that America *itself* (as an idea) is inherently racist
 - a. so, attacks on people, statues, businesses, police, etc. are justified as attempts to eradicate the “source” of the problem (**i.e.** things “out there” that represent it)
 - b. **IOW:** it’s not about *me* ... it’s everyone and everything *else* that is the problem ...
 3. rather, James argues that **the source of all strife is the “passions ... at war” within each individual, which then results in outward strife with others of differing passions**
 - a. “*passions*” (*hēdonē*) = pleasures; enjoyments; something we enjoy doing and is pleasing
 1. hedonism = the pursuit of pleasure; sensual self-indulgence; the belief that meeting the needs of our own gratification takes priority over all other matters of life
 2. **i.e.** the result of the Fall whereby humans are turned “inward” to their own self-gratification, whereby “needs” expand to fill the whole of the meaning of life (**e.g. a child: “I need ...”**)
 - a. **e.g.** Eve became a *hedonist* when the fruit of the Tree became more pleasing to her eye than the wonder of God himself (**Genesis 3:6** – “*she saw ... the tree was to be desired ...*”)
 - b. **e.g.** Satan attempted to turn Jesus into a *hedonist* by turning the focus to his own *physical* needs over the will of the Father by suggesting he turn stones into bread (**Matt. 4:3**)
 3. **worldliness (see v. 4)** = friendship with the world – the sense that life is all about what this world has to offer; that human existence is all about indulging one’s desires and pleasures
 - b. “*are at war*” = engaged in war; fighting; lit. an encamped army ready to make war
 1. **possible:** the *spiritual conflict* within the born-again individual between the flesh and the mind, the struggle of the Christian against his own *fleshly* desires (**Romans 7:15, 19, 22-24**)

“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing ... For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! ...”
 2. **more likely:** the **lack of spiritual conflict** within the born-again individual, such that his inward desires are similar to the *unregenerate* man: a constant “pushing” and “pulling” of various desires, all vying for attention and gratification, *but never being controlled in self-sacrifice*
 - a. **IOW:** Christians acting like reprobate men – Christians **abusing their liberty in Christ** to *indulge* in sin, rather than taking that sin “captive” and being transformed in holiness
 - b. **IOW:** Christians *fighting with other Christians* because they *want their way* ...
- c. the description of worldliness (vv. 2-3)**
 1. “*desire ... murder*”, “*covet ... fight*” = inward “wants” (**i.e.** perceived needs) that “spill out” because they are constantly unmet, causing conflict with others
 - a. **IMO:** James is *not* accusing Christians in the churches of murdering each other, but uses the example as *hyperbole* (**i.e.** to make a point using strong language designed to get their attention)
 - b. **IOW:** the *source* of strife is your own *worldliness* – as Christians, being focused on “wants”, and when those “wants” go unfulfilled, you lash out at others, *sometimes violently* (quarrels and fights)
 2. “*you do not have because you do not ask*” = you seek your “needs” from the world, rather than from God; you do not *assume* a stance of self-sacrifice of *your* desires before the will of God
 - a. **note:** this has a similar context to **Matthew 7:7-8; 21:22**

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened ... And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”

 1. clearly, Jesus insists that all who come to God for what they need (or want) will find it in him
 2. but, the asking (desiring) must always within the context of faith – trusting God to supply *only what is best*, not what we “want” regardless

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- b. “you ask and do not receive ... spend it on your passions” = when you do seek God, you seek selfishly; your desire is all about what you “want” in this world (i.e. worldliness)
- 3. **principle: worldliness is a focus on temporal wants, and it flows out of a heart strongly attached to this world – this focus (unfortunately) is why even believers have strife**
 - a. to be “doers of the Word” (in faith) is to be transformed in our basic desires from the pleasures and passions of this world to the overwhelming joy of knowing Christ
 - b. e.g. John Piper, *Desiring God* = being a *Christian hedonist* is to find all of our pleasure *in him*, that our desires are fulfilled *in him*, that we glorify God by enjoying *him* forever