

James 4

by Peter Maiden

The sermon emphasizes the importance of submitting to God, resisting the devil, and drawing near to God in order to overcome a worldly spirit and live a holy life.

Duration: 36:01

Scripture: James 1:27, James 3:2-12, James 4:7-8, James 4:10-14, James 4:17

Topics: "James"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the fourth chapter of the Epistle of James. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the transient nature of life and the need to submit to the Lord's will. The preacher highlights the arrogance of those who boast about their future plans without acknowledging God's sovereignty. He encourages the listeners to adopt an attitude of total dependence on God and to live in accordance with His will, as exemplified by the apostle Paul.

Transcript

And so we come to the fourth chapter tonight of the epistle of James. I'm afraid you're going to have to study chapter five yourself as we've only got four evenings. It's a great chapter, so please do study on into the fifth chapter, but we read the whole of the fourth chapter this evening.

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your own desires that battle within you? You want something, but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight.

You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

Or do you think scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us tends towards envy, but he gives us more grace? That is why scripture says God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves then to God, resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God, and he will come near to you.

Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you who are double-minded. Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning, and your joy to gloom.

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother, or judges him, speaks against the law and judges it.

When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you, who are you to judge your neighbor? Now listen, you who say today or tomorrow, we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business, and make money.

Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You're a mist that appears for a little while, and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, if it's the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.

As it is, you boast and brag, and all such boasting is evil. Anyone then, who knows the good he ought to do, and doesn't do it, sins. And again, we pray that God will help us to understand these words.

Now those of you who have been with us for three nights, will forgive me if I just once again, very quickly, try and give the background and what precedes chapter four, just for those who may be with us for the first time. We have, I think, deduced that it was James, the natural brother of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was the author of this epistle. And he wrote the epistle from the city of Jerusalem, where he was the acknowledged leader of the church, one of the main congregations in the early days of the Christian church.

And it's pretty obvious that he wrote the epistle because he had understood the days of difficulty and suffering were ahead for the Christian church. And so in chapter one, after showing the Christians how they should respond to difficulties, from verse two down to verse twenty-five, in verses twenty-six and twenty-seven, he gives three great proofs of genuine Christianity. And he begins something that he continues to do throughout the epistle, challenging the believers.

Is your faith genuine? Is it genuine? And when the trial comes, rather than being destroyed, will it, in fact, be refined and improved by trouble? And he takes these three great proofs of genuine Christianity in the next three chapters. And we saw in chapter two how he draws out the theme of the true Christian having a concern for those who are in need in the world. And then in that classic passage in chapter three, we saw him drawing out the point that the true Christian controls his tongue, bridles his tongue.

If you go back to verse twenty-seven of chapter one, we'll see the third great proof of a genuine Christian, and that's the one we're going to look at tonight. Because at the end of verse twenty-seven, James says, religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, end of the verse, keeping oneself from being polluted by the world. So if you are a genuine Christian, says James, you will desire to keep yourself from the pollution which we are surrounded by in this world.

And James draws out this point in the fourth chapter, which we're going to look at this evening. And so if you turn to chapter four in verse one, you'll see that it begins with a question. What causes fights and quarrels amongst you? And this is very much related to the end of chapter three.

You remember last night that at the end of chapter three, we looked at the fruits of heavenly wisdom, and you can see them there in verse seventeen. Purity, peaceableness, gentleness, reasonableness, full of

mercy, good fruits, without wavering, and without hypocrisy. Those are the fruits of heavenly wisdom.

All right, says James. If that's the case, what's the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? If heavenly wisdom gives you a peace-loving spirit, what is the cause of quarrels and conflicts? And in the next few verses, verses two to eleven, James seeks to answer the question he has posed. And the key word is the word pleasures.

You see it in verse two, and again in verse three. Depending on your translation, it will either be pleasures, desires, lusts, or passions. It's the key word of this whole fourth chapter.

It's a very special Greek word, used on only two other occasions in the New Testament. And on both of the other occasions, it's used in a bad sense. For example, Luke 8 14.

Jesus is explaining the parable of the sower. And he says, the seed which fell among the thorns is like the people who heard the word of God, but as they go on their way, they are choked with worries, riches, and the pleasures of this life. That's exactly the same word.

Pleasures, choking, spiritual life. And then the other New Testament usage is in Titus 3 and verse 3. Paul says, we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures. Now the exact meaning of the word is self-pleasing, the desire for self-gratification.

And that's the basic characteristic of the non-Christian. It's the great cause, cause of quarrels and conflicts in families, in industry, and according to verse 1, in international politics as well. The cause of it all is this basic human desire to gratify and to please self.

So here, says James, is another yardstick by which you can measure the reality of your faith. Do you want to know whether you're a genuine Christian or not? Ask yourself a question, says James. Is your basic desire in life to gratify yourself or to glorify your God? When you get out of bed in the morning, what's your first thought? Is it how can I get the most out of this day for myself? Or is it how can I this day bring the most glory to God? Now notice that in verse 4, James calls this desire for self-gratification or self-pleasing friendship with the world.

Here then is true worldliness. I believe the church has often had strange ideas about worldliness. I remember as a young child being taught by my parents and by my Sunday school teachers Peter, you mustn't be worldly.

You mustn't be worldly. And I grew up with a desire not to be worldly. I didn't want to be worldly.

But no one ever explained to me what worldliness was. I didn't want to be worldly, but I hadn't had worldliness explained. And I honestly grew up with the desire or with the feeling, the sense, sorry, that worldliness had something to do with the length of your hair or the kind of music you enjoy.

But that's not what James says here, is it? The length of your hair might be a characteristic of a worldly heart. It might not be. Jesus probably had shoulder-length hair.

The kind of music you enjoy might be a characteristic of a worldly heart, but not necessarily so. James says the essence of a worldly man is that he wants to please himself. The essence of a spiritual man is that he wants to glorify God.

So that's the essence of worldliness. Now James goes on to show how serious worldliness is. Look at the opening phrase of verse 4. It's very startling.

James says, you adulterous people. Worldly Christians, Christians who gratify self rather than glorify God, worldly Christians commit spiritual adultery. That's how serious it is.

Now, what does that mean? When you became a Christian, when I became a Christian, we were brought into the most intimate relationship imaginable with the Lord Jesus Christ. So near, so very near to God, we cannot nearer be. We've been brought into a most intimate relationship.

And the only illustration which comes anything near the intimacy of this relationship, and even it falls short, is the illustration of marriage. You have been married to Jesus Christ. He is the bridegroom.

We, his people, are the bride. Now, says James, after being married to Christ, you go off seeking to gratify yourself with worldly pleasures. You go chasing other loves.

It might be the love of money. It might be the love of power. You go chasing other loves.

And that, says James, is spiritual adultery. The challenge is quite clear. The Lord Jesus Christ does not want to share your heart and mind.

He wants all of your heart or none of your heart. As the famous little chorus puts it, if he is not Lord at all, then he is not Lord at all. The Lord Jesus will not share anyone's heart.

He either is your Lord, or he's not your Lord at all. We were looking this afternoon with the Bible class at the famous words of Luke 14. They're also repeated in Matthew 10, a little more clearly possibly.

Jesus says, anyone who loves father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me. The Lord Jesus either has the primary place in your heart, or you're not worthy of him. So that's how serious adultery is, or that's how serious wilderness is, sorry.

It is spiritual adultery. But then look secondly at verse 8. It's also inconsistency. It's not only adultery, it's inconsistency.

And I've shown you on the previous three nights, how this theme of inconsistency runs through the whole of this epistle. James says, cleanse your hands you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. What's a worldly Christian? He's a double-minded man.

Oh, he knows that God exists. He knows that he should be worshipping God, but he's also so interested in himself, getting the most out of this world for himself. He is a double-minded man, and he's unstable in all his ways.

Now you can see further confirmation of this inconsistency if you look back to verse 5. And it's an extremely challenging verse, but it's a difficult one. It appears that we have a quotation here from the Old Testament. But in fact, there is no quotation in the Old Testament which exactly corresponds to these words in verse 5. And so the scholars have decided that we have in verse 5 the summary of the content of many Old Testament passages.

And the quotation points out two things. Number one, that God is a jealous God. Never forget that about God.

He is a jealous God. That's why he won't share your heart. He either has it all, or he doesn't want any.

He's a jealous God, and this jealous God has placed his spirit into your life. Spirit dwells within you. How dreadful then it is to have our lives filled with a rival spirit, the spirit of the world.

That's the problem with the worldly Christian. God's spirit dwells within him, desiring the prominent place. But the worldly Christian has another spirit living alongside, the spirit of worldliness.

And we must realize that our God is a jealous God. So there's the twofold problem of worldliness in the life of a Christian. It's spiritual adultery, and it's dreadful inconsistency.

Look thirdly then at the results of this. If you are a worldly Christian tonight, what can you expect to be your experience? Number one, look at verse 3. Worldliness makes our prayers ineffective. Verse 3, you ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you might spend what you get on your pleasures.

You see, the worldly Christian has a divided heart. And so he asks God for things, but the motive is questionable. Now we're thinking of God in rather human terms when we put it like this.

It is as though God cannot trust the worldly Christian. You come to God and you say, Father, I want this. And your father says to you, why do you want it, my son? Do you want it to glorify me, or do you want it to gratify yourself? You come to God to ask him for health and long life, and God says, why? Why do you want health? Why do you want long life? Is it to gratify yourself, or is it to glorify me? I wonder if some of you are struggling in your prayer life tonight.

You feel your prayers bounce back to you from the ceiling. You feel that God is far away, doesn't even hear your cry. Maybe here is something you should check in your life.

Has a worldly spirit found its way in? Is the bent of your life to please yourself, rather than to glorify God? If that's the case, it's true. Your prayers will get no higher than the ceiling. God cannot trust the worldly Christian.

But then secondly, look at verse 6, the second result of worldliness. It brings the active opposition of God against you. Quoting Proverbs 3 and verse 34, James says God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Throughout scripture, of course, you see the active opposition of God against the proud person. Now, what is a proud man? A proud man simply is someone whose heart is turned away from his Creator. That's what pride is.

When your heart, when your life is turned away from your Creator, you become proud. You're thinking of yourself. You're putting yourself first, rather than your God, and that is the essence of pride, and will bring the opposition of God upon you.

The twofold result, then, where a worldly spirit takes over in a Christian's experience. You will know struggles. You will know problems in your life, because God will oppose that worldly spirit.

He will oppose that proud heart, and you will find prayer life almost impossible, because God cannot trust you to answer your requests. But notice, finally, in this first section of the chapter, that James shows us the remedy, and thank God for that. It would be terrible to leave us without a remedy, wouldn't it? The

remedy for the divided heart.

There are a number of steps. Step 1, verse 6, 7, and 10. You must humble yourself, and you must submit yourself to God.

In other words, it's vital to get before God, and realize your inadequacy, your absolute dependence upon God, and therefore to submit yourself to Him completely. It's very, very important not to stop there. James does not just say, submit yourself to God, does he? He says, resist the devil.

And here in verse 7, we have one of the most important verses in the Bible upon the subject of holiness. It's vital that every Christian understands James 4 and verse 7. How do you become holy? How does it happen? Sometimes you get the impression that all you have to do is submit yourself to God. You know the chorus, let go, and let God have His wonderful way.

Your burdens will vanish, your nights will turn to day, all you've got to do is let go, and let God have His wonderful way. That's submitting ourselves to God, and we need to do that, but that chorus doesn't tell the whole truth. Or take the hymn from Youth Praise.

If I try to live for you, Lord, today, if I try to follow your wonderful way, then all of my life would be me, and not you, and none of your glory would ever shine through. What's the result? You don't try. If I tried to live, then none of your glory would ever shine through, so don't try.

I've actually heard people being counseled in that way. People coming to a counselor and saying, look, I'm having a terrible struggle in my Christian life, I'm not getting anywhere, and the counselor says, stop trying. That's your problem, you're trying too hard.

You've got to learn to abide in Christ. You've got to learn to submit yourself to God. Now, this is true, but it's not the whole truth.

The Bible says, yes, submit yourself to God, but actively resist the devil. That's why in the Bible you're told constantly that you must crucify the flesh. Now, let me try and explain something about the Christian experience.

I wonder if you can grasp this. When you came to know the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, God's Spirit came to live within you. Every person who puts their faith and trust in Christ receives the Holy Spirit of God.

No man can say that Jesus is the Christ without the Holy Spirit. So the Holy Spirit indwells the life of every believer. But that doesn't mean that your old nature, the old thing which used to rule in your life, is eradicated.

Not at all. It's still there. That's why in Galatians 5, 17, Paul says, the flesh, that's the old part which used to rule, fights against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.

You see, the Bible says we crucify the flesh. Now, think about crucifixion. It's a slow death, isn't it? The man who is crucified, he doesn't die immediately, and the Romans used to put a guard around the cross.

They would never leave a cross unguarded. Because the crucified man would try and struggle free, and it's like that in our lives as well. Yes, the flesh is crucified, but it's struggling to get free.

It's kicking. It's thrashing. It wants to be free.

It wants to rule in your life again. If you're going to lead a holy life, every day of your life, you've got to take your spiritual hammer, and you've got to knock the nails back in again, just to ensure that the flesh stays on the cross, and that you can walk in the Spirit. This is how to deal with spiritual wilderness.

There's no great experience which is going to deal with it once and for all. Sometimes you get that idea, don't you? There's some great spiritual experience which you can have. It puts you on cloud nine spiritually, and you sail through the rest of your life.

No more problems. What nonsense. Now I've had many crisis experiences in my spiritual life, I'll tell you.

I don't want to play down crisis experiences. Let's have as many as we need. But listen, every crisis, not followed by a process, will soon become an abscess.

Don't forget that. Any crisis, not followed by a process, will soon become an abscess. Becoming holy is a process.

There may be many crises, but it's a process. Day by day by day, knocking the nails in the flesh, and aspiring to the things of the Spirit. So if you want to deal with wilderness in your heart, number one, you submit yourself to God.

But number two, you resist the devil, and says James, he will flee from you. What a promise. Hold on to that.

If you resist the devil, he will flee from you. Look at the next step, verse 8. Draw near to God. It's also followed by a glorious promise.

He will draw near to you. That's the great privilege of the new covenant. No longer are we limited to one approach to God through our representative, the high priest, once a year.

But with boldness, we can draw near. With a full heart, in full assurance of faith, we can draw into the presence of God. Now, I feel personally this statement is very, very necessary in this epistle.

I'm glad James wrote these words. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. It's possible, isn't it, to feel utterly condemned by the epistle of James.

You say, I don't have a heart of concern for the needy. You say, my tongue is totally out of control. You say, I have a worldly spirit.

James says, listen, just draw near to God. With your worldly spirit, with your lack of concern, with your untamable tongue, draw near to God in repentance and submission, and he will draw near to you. And the final instruction is in verse 9, and it's a call for true repentance.

Now, repentance is not something that a man can work up within himself. Repentance, according to Acts 11, 18, is a gift from God. But although we can't engineer repentance in our hearts, we can fulfill the conditions.

And the conditions for true repentance, here's just mentioned. If we submit ourselves to God, if we actively resist the devil, if we draw near to God, then he will grant us the grace of genuine repentance. So that's

the first section of chapter 4. Now remember, it's an elaboration of the point he makes at the end of chapter 1. A true Christian desires to keep himself unspotted from the world.

He desires that that worldly spirit does not get a grip of him. And this desire is so strong because he realizes the serious consequences of worldliness. It's spiritual adultery.

It's total inconsistency. It destroys our prayer lives. It brings the active opposition of God upon us.

And so the genuine believer, every time he recognizes this spirit invading his heart, he submits to God. He resists the devil. He draws near in true repentance.

Now James brings the chapter to a close by two little illustrations. I find James so helpful with his illustrations. Two illustrations of worldliness.

The first is in verses 11 and 12 and concerns a subject which we've previously noted is one of the great themes of the epistle. He's talking about the tongue again, the misuse of the tongue. And this time, verses 11 and 12, his theme is backbiting.

The Greek word is to speak against someone else. That's what the word slander means. To actively speak against someone else.

Now that's an example of worldliness. This is how Dr. Tasker puts it. How large a part of worldly talk which often passes as witty and is far from being unacceptable to society consists of harsh criticism of other people, spoken sometimes with malicious intent.

That's so true, isn't it? It's so easy to get a laugh out of someone else. To raise yourself in people's estimation by pressing someone else down. Most of human relationships are competitive relationships.

In a Christian, they should not be in any sense competitive. So often, sadly, they become. But most human relationships are competitive.

We want to be seen as better than someone else and so by direct criticism or by indirect witty remarks, we push the other person down that we might gratify, raise ourselves. That, says James, is a perfect example of a worldly spirit. And it's that which causes war in the fellowship, in the family, amongst nations.

It's that desire to gratify self, which you can see so often in normal human conversation. And he shows us how serious such an attitude is. First of all, verse 11, he says, if you backbite and judge others in this way, you're usurping God's position.

You are judging men, and that's God's job, not yours. So when you press someone else down, you're usurping the authority of God. Secondly, you're breaking the law of God, he says.

The law he may have been referring to is found in Leviticus 19, 16. You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people. Now, says James, if you constantly slander your brother, you are judging that law.

Now, what does he mean by that? Well, if you constantly break a law, you're passing judgment on that law. You're saying that law isn't worth anything. If you're constantly driving at 60 miles per hour in a 30 mile per hour limit area, you're saying that law is worthless.

It's meaningless, and the people who pass that law have no sense. And if you constantly break the law of God, that's what you're saying. You might not be saying it with your lips, but you're saying it by your actions.

The law is worthless. And James says, I want you to remember who gave the law. Who gave the law? Your saying is worthless.

The one who gave that law is the one who is able to save and to destroy, he says. The great lawgiver himself. So, there's one example of worldliness.

Backbiting, pressing another man down in order to elevate yourself. The man who does it is taking God's position, and he's passing judgment on God's law. Then look finally at verses 13 to 17.

James turns here to another kind of arrogance, another kind of worldliness. He's just written of the arrogance of those who openly break the law of God. Now another kind of arrogance.

The readers would probably be very familiar with traveling Jewish traders, and it's to them that James turns for this illustration. See how self-confident these people are. See how utterly presumptuous they are.

Look at verse 13. These traveling traders said five things. They said, today or tomorrow we will leave.

Secondly, we will go to such and such a city. Thirdly, we will spend one year there. Fourthly, we will engage in business.

And fifthly, great prospects, I don't think there could have been a recession. We will make profit. Five things which they were going to do.

And they felt they had the ability and the right to do so. Now the great fault of these people, says James, is that they don't understand themselves. They don't understand life.

And that's why in verse 14, you have one of the most memorable verses of scripture. What kind of life is yours? That's the exact translation. What kind of life is yours? These people were acting as though they were gods.

We will do this. We will do that. Not only today, but this year, we will do this.

We will do that. They were acting like gods, but they were just mortal men. What is your life, says James? You're just a vapor, just a bit of mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

So because that is the case, because our life is so transient, because it's so uncertain, rather than saying, we will do this today and we will do that tomorrow. The spiritual Christian says, if the Lord wills, we will live. And if he wills, we will do this.

Now, brethren and sisters, it's one thing to put DV on our church notices, but it's another thing to actually live in the light of this truth. Paul managed to live every day in the light of this truth. So when he said goodbye to the Christians at Ephesus, he said in Acts 18, I will return to you again if God wills.

He says to the Corinthians, I will come to you soon if the Lord wills. He says to the Philippians, I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you. I wonder if you've got that attitude tonight, attitude of total dependence.

You realize that you're nothing without God. You realize that your life is just a little mist which could be blown away tonight. Without God, you're nothing.

You're no one, nothing certain apart from his foundation. This then is another example of worldliness, this arrogance, this boasting. An example of spirituality is dependence upon God.

And then he brings the fourth chapter to a close. With this great statement concerning sin. And the 17th verse of James 4 is a potent definition of the sin of omission.

To one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin. Never forget that, will you? Sinning is not just doing wrong things. Sinning is failing to do right things.

You know the will of God for your life and you do not do it. That's sin. You know the will of God for your family and you do not lead in that direction.

That's sin. To him who knows what is right and does not do it, to him it is sin. And presumption is a clear example of such omission.

We fail to depend upon God. We know we should be dependent upon him, but we live in our own energy. It's the sin of omission.

So this is the fourth chapter of James. It says, James, if faith is genuine, the desire will be to keep yourself unspotted by the trends and by the corruption of this world. And while it lives for self, the Christian lives for God, to glorify him and to bring him praise.

We don't know what's ahead for us, do we? In the years which are to come. I trust that we will take the epistle of James home to our hearts and we will examine ourselves.

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