



Women's Bible Study  
James: Be Doers, Not Just Hearers of the Word  
James 4:1-12: Demonstrating Faith Through Submission  
March 14, 2007 – Jann Wright

In my previous professional life, 10 years ago, I worked for a large university based organization. One of the most enjoyable and engaging aspects of my job was to diagnose difficult problems in work groups and then help work teams formulate solutions to address their particular problem.

The most significant lesson I learned from those experiences was, -- if you want to truly solve a problem you need to spend some time upfront defining the problem. I realize that sounds very simplistic; but you would be surprised how quickly all of us want to jump to solving a problem before we even know it or understand it.

Let me give you a recent example in our community. Several articles in the Post-Bulletin have identified a problem with downtown handicapped parking<sup>1</sup>. Close monitoring of the handicapped parking spots have revealed that they were occupied by the same vehicles for most of the day.

The observable problem was that those with handicapped parking stickers were parking in handicapped spaces for 6-8 hours of the day. The proposed solution to that problem is to limit the parking time in those spaces to the posted time limits on the meters; 30 minutes, 90 minutes, and three hours. Now at first glance all seems well and good. The problem has been identified and solved; but I am not so sure that we have identified the real problem.

Basically the implied problem is that people are overusing their privileges to park in handicapped spots. However, with the observable facts, the problem could also be that there are not enough downtown parking spaces for handicapped employees or that handicapped parking stickers are being used inappropriately perhaps by some who don't need them. In each of those cases you would need a different solution to truly solve the problem. Well, you get my point. Defining the problem is critical if you want to really solve it.

James in our passage today/tonight gives very careful attention to defining the problem. In Chapter 4 he provides the presenting problem and then the real underlying problem. I need to warn you before we begin our study of these twelve verses; there is a great deal of information here and we will not be able to cover every detail in every phrase even though I would like to. Rather we are going to focus our study along the following three headings: the presenting problem, the real problem, and six prescriptions to solve the problem.

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<sup>1</sup> Rochester Post-Bulletin. Handicapped parking terms to change. Friday March 2, 2007. page A1. Rochester, MN.

Our lesson last week focused on two kinds of wisdom: heavenly wisdom and earthly wisdom. Gretchen carefully detailed the differences between the two. Earthly wisdom does not come down from heaven. It is unspiritual and of the devil. Heavenly wisdom is pure, peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Our lesson today/tonight will take those general descriptions about wisdom and apply them to a specific problem in the local church.

## Passage

### **James 4:1-12**

<sup>1</sup>What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

<sup>4</sup>You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. <sup>5</sup>Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? <sup>6</sup>But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:  
"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

<sup>7</sup>Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup>Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup>Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup>Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

<sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>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?

## Presenting Problem

Let's begin by looking at the presenting problem. The presenting problem is by its very nature obvious. It is composed of things that you can see and often hear. The presenting problem is identified by James when he asks the question, **"What causes fights and quarrels among you?"** Fights and quarrels are the presenting problem. The Greek word for fights is polemoi and it refers to a battle with weapons, an armed conflict. Quarrels is from the Greek word machai which also refers to fighting, but without weapons. So we have in this body of believers conflict that has risen to the level of at least symbolic armed conflict. James doesn't name the particular subject that had generated all of this conflict and that is likely because the subject had far ceased to be important and the battles had now taken center stage.

We want to keep in mind that James in this passage is not talking about healthy problem solving that arises naturally as churches do their work. There is a place for these reasonable types of discussion and even disagreement in the church. We have patterns for this in the book of Acts as the early church faced issues that needed resolution. James in this passage; however, is referring to something far more sinister,

something that reflects this earthly wisdom that he has been talking about in previous chapters.

This chart from the Life Application Bible Commentary provides some examples of what this destructive conflict may have looked like. Christians can use weapons such as: **missiles** to attack church members from long range. They can engage in **guerrilla tactics** where they ambush the unsuspecting. They can act as **snipers** with well-aimed criticisms. They can assume the role of a **terrorist** in which no one is immune from being hurt. They can lay **mines** ensuring that others fail in their efforts to serve God. They can engage in **espionage** using friendships to get potentially damaging information about others. They can put out **propaganda** by using gossip to spread damaging information about others. They can engage in **cold war tactics** by freezing out an opponent by withdrawing or refusing to talk to him or her. They can even launch a **nuclear attack** where they are willing to sacrifice the needs of the whole church if they don't get their way.

Church Wars	
<b>Missiles</b>	Attacking church members from long range.
<b>Guerrilla tactics</b>	Ambushing the unsuspecting.
<b>Snipers</b>	Well-aimed criticisms.
<b>Terrorism</b>	No one is immune from being hurt.
<b>Mines</b>	Ensuring that others will fail in their efforts to serve God.
<b>Espionage</b>	Using friendships to get potentially damaging information about others.
<b>Propaganda</b>	Using gossip to spread damaging information about others.
<b>Cold War</b>	Freezing out an opponent by withdrawing or refusing to talk to him or her.
<b>Nuclear Attack</b>	Being willing to sacrifice the church if the goals of my group are not met. <sup>2</sup>

Pretty sobering isn't it. We have the potential to become very nasty in our relationships with one another. Benedict Spinoza was a famous 17<sup>th</sup> Century Philosopher. He was Jewish, but was eventually excommunicated because of his positions against the Law and his view of God. He was not a Christian; but he made this very insightful observation about Christians. He said, "I have often wondered that persons who make boast of professing the Christian religion—namely love, joy, peace, temperance, and charity to all men—should quarrel with such rancorous animosity, and display daily towards one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than the virtues which they profess, is the readiest criteria of their faith."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Life Application Bible Commentary: James. Barton, Bruce B., Veerman, David R., and Wilson, Neil. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Carol Stream, Illinois. 1992 page 92.

<sup>3</sup> Life Application Bible Commentary: James. Barton, Bruce B., Veerman, David R., and Wilson, Neil. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Carol Stream, Illinois. 1992 page 90.

The unsaved world is looking at us. They are watching how we treat each other. Sadly, sometimes in our interactions we reveal none of the love that Christ commanded us to display.

### The Real Problem

Now, we move to the real problem, the fights and quarrels are only the presenting problem. Now, if it were us diagnosing the problem we might guess that the church members are suffering from some sort of persecution or attack from the outside, or maybe it is a more practical problem that is responsible for their behavior, maybe their church facilities or their budgets are too small, or maybe they are simply deficient in modern communication techniques. Those are the kinds of things that we would tend to look for in defining the problem. James; however, goes literally right to the heart of the conflict and tells us that the real problem is that the people are consumed with selfish desires.

What does he mean by selfish desires? He has given us many clues in this book. In this passage he refers to covetness, pride, and pleasures. If we look back even to last week's lesson we see bitter envy and selfish ambition mentioned twice. Look at verse 16 of Chapter 3, "For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice." Sounds like a perfect lead in to the conflicts that are being described in chapter 4. 2 Timothy 3:2-4 also lists some selfish desires that may have been part of what James had in mind: "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, <sup>4</sup>treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God--". These certainly fit the context of this passage.

James mentions that these desires can lead to coveting and even killing. Commentators disagree at this point whether James was referring to murder in a figurative or literal sense. He is likely describing murder in a figurative sense in that church wars can destroy others' reputations and spirits; but just a quick read of a newspaper or history will confirm that selfish desires can ultimately result in the death of another person. Consider this example from Matthew 27:15-18. Jesus is before Pilate. <sup>15</sup>Now it was the governor's custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. <sup>16</sup>At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. <sup>17</sup>So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" <sup>18</sup>For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.

### **Prayerlessness/Corrupt Prayers**

James also mentions a problem that accompanies these selfish desires and that is prayerlessness or corrupt prayers. Not surprisingly those who are engaged in fights and quarrels to satisfy their selfish desires are often not engaged in prayer. We don't seek God in those circumstances because we don't want to invite the Holy Spirit to examine our hearts and convict us of sin. As a result we don't pray or we pray with our

selfish desires in mind asking God to grant things that would bring glory and honor to us rather than to God.

### **Adulterous Behavior**

Lastly, in case the people have not yet come to an understanding about their very poor spiritual condition; James takes the bold step of identifying the people as adulterers. At first, that might seem totally out of context to us; but to the Jewish Christians he was addressing it would have made perfect sense.

You see in the Old Testament the relationship between God and his people was likened to a marriage: a very precious, enduring, and lifelong commitment. God never broke his marriage vows; but the people often broke theirs. Ezekiel 6:9 says, "Then in the nations where they have been carried captive, those who escape will remember me—how I have been grieved by their adulterous hearts, which have turned away from me, and by their eyes, which have lusted after their idols. . .". They were called adulterers to describe the deep violation of the spiritual covenant of marriage between God and his people. James is basically saying to this group of Christians, your attitudes and actions link you to your unfaithful ancestors who turned their backs against God.

### Six Prescriptions

Now that we have a thoroughly disgusting understanding of the problem that James was addressing, we are ready to listen to his prescriptions to solve the problem. So how do we address fights and quarrels in the body of Christ and their underlying cause of selfish desires? There are at least six prescriptions in this passage. Interestingly these prescriptions are almost all issues of the heart.

#### **1. Submit**

The first prescription is to submit, specifically we must submit to God. This is really the overarching theme under which all the other prescriptions fit. Submission is neither a well-loved concept in our culture nor one that is frequently endorsed. As women many of us may even have a bristling response when we hear the word; that is because we have been taught that submission is for those who are too weak and too ignorant to make their own decisions. That definition however, is not a biblical one.

Biblical submission is rather an orderly organization of authority. When we submit we agree to work within the orderly organization of authority that God has established. This organization is for our good, for order in our world, and to accomplish the purposes of God. This orderly organization of authority begins with our submission to God.

Our example for submission is Christ who was strong, competent, and submissive. John 12:49 Jesus said, "For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak(NKJV). Luke 22:42 in the garden Jesus said, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." Christ submitted to the authority of his Father. If we want to address the

disease of quarrels and fighting in the church and among each other we must submit to God and recognize that He is the final authority.

## **2. Resist**

The second prescription is to resist, specifically to resist the devil. Resist is not a passive action it implies specific effort. To resist the devil is going to take effort, in fact consider yourselves in a war, a spiritual battle. Ephesians 6:12 says, For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

There are two kinds of wisdom. One is heavenly and one is earthly. The devil stands behind all of the disorder and evil in these nasty disputes. We have to be aware of that and ready with concentrated effort to resist. Remember we have defensive weapons: belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, our feet shod with gospel of peace, the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation. We also have one very powerful offensive weapon, the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. And finally we have a weapon that the Christians James was addressing didn't seem to be able to wield; and that weapon is prayer. We can go to God in the midst of quarrels and fights and ask for his power, his guidance, and his intervention. This prescription also has a promise, if we submit to God, and resist the devil using the weapons God has provided he will flee from us.

## **3. Come Near**

The third prescription is to come near to God. God is not hiding from us. We are the ones who are hiding. God invites us to come near to him. When we come near to God, he will respond by coming near to us. We can draw near to God in corporate worship, in private prayers, in the reading and study of his word, and in solitude when we are quiet in his presence.

## **4. Wash and Purify**

The fourth prescription is to wash and purify. We are to wash our hands and purify our hearts. Notice that one is an external action and one is an internal action. Likely the Jewish Christians were being called back to the remembrance of centuries of the sacrificial system in which washing and purification were very deliberate and visible actions. For example in Exodus 30:18-21 God commands Moses saying, <sup>18</sup> "Make a bronze basin, with its bronze stand, for washing. Place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and put water in it. <sup>19</sup> Aaron and his sons are to wash their hands and feet with water from it. <sup>20</sup> Whenever they enter the Tent of Meeting, they shall wash with water so that they will not die. Also, when they approach the altar to minister by presenting an offering made to the LORD by fire, <sup>21</sup> they shall wash their hands and feet so that they will not die. This is to be a lasting ordinance for Aaron and his descendants for the generations to come."

In this passage in James the Christians are being called to repentance, just like the saints in the Old Testament, and just like us today. And we on this side of the cross should even more fully be able to understand the reality of cleansing through the blood of Christ.

We can wash and purify by coming before God with an attitude of repentance. We can ask him to reveal unconfessed sin in our lives. Of course, we must be willing then to confess that sin and deal with it. In areas of quarrels, fights, and conflicts we can ask, "Lord, do I have a selfish desire that is seeking to be gratified? Lord, what am I doing to contribute to this conflict?" If we are going to act with heavenly wisdom then we must seek it and act upon it by washing and purifying.

## **5. Grieve**

The fifth prescription is to grieve. James even goes so far as to tell the people to change their laughter into mourning and their joy into gloom. Now, James has nothing against appropriate laughter and joy; but flippant, coarse, and sensual laughter in the face of serious sin is clearly an affront to God.

We must do more than merely acknowledge our mistakes; we must develop a Godly sorrow over our sin. Just be sure your grief and sorrow is Godly sorrow and not worldly sorrow. 2 Corinthians 7:10 says, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death". Grieving over our sin is a prescription that will attack the root sins of selfish desires. These days leading up to Easter are particularly appropriate to contemplate and grieve over our specific individual sins that put Jesus on the cross. Until we really grasp the deepness of our sin we can't really appreciate the fresh joy of being forgiven.

## **6. Be Humble**

The last prescription is to be humble. As submission was the overarching theme to the prescriptions, humility is the concluding summation of all the prescriptions. Only in humility can we submit to God, resist the devil, come near to God, wash our hands, purify our hearts, and grieve over our sins. Interestingly it is these behaviors that will result in God lifting us up something our selfish desires can never do.

All of these actions require our willingness and attention. No one else can force us to do these things and no one else can accurately evaluate whether we are consistently practicing them. For that reason, we must take responsibility and discipline ourselves to make progress in these areas.

This would be a good place to stop, right here. We have more than enough work to keep us occupied for a long time; but James is never content to consider spiritual development as merely a personal exercise. No, he is ever calling us to a visible outworking of all the internal workings of our hearts and spirits and so he leaves us with two practical outworking of all that he has said.

## **Practical Outcomes**

### **1. Do not slander**

The first is do not slander. Once again we are back to controlling our tongues. Noah Webster in his 1828 edition of Webster's Dictionary defined slander as "a false tale or

report maliciously uttered and tending to injure the reputation of another by lessening him in the esteem of his fellow citizens, by exposing him to impeachment and punishment, or by impairing his means of living.”<sup>4</sup> You can easily see how slander would be tremendous fuel for any conflict among Christians. Our mouths get us in so much trouble. So out of all of the prescriptions that James has provided this is one of the practical outcomes he insists upon.

## **2. Do not judge**

The other practical outcome is related to do not slander and it is do not judge. The Greek word here actually means condemn. There is obviously a role for evaluation and discernment in the lives of Christians. 1 John 4:1 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. So we obviously have to make some discernments about good and evil. We also have verses like 1 Corinthians 5:3-5 that talk about disciplining church members. So there are prescribed methods of evaluation and accountability given to the church.

Given some of those examples, it does not seem to be the case here that James is telling us to suspend all discernment. However, given the context, I think he is reflecting back on this attitude of selfish desires that include envy, pride, selfish ambition and a whole host of others. We can take those selfish desires and set ourselves up as judges over our fellow Christians. We end up condemning them through slander, gossip, and other strategies of the tongue. When we behave in that kind of judgmental way, James is saying that we have removed ourselves from our assigned place of being under the law, responsible to obey it, and follow it and have placed ourselves over the law as a judge. In fact, we have tried to take on the role of God, because only God is perfect and therefore able to sit in judgment. That is not our role and we must not try to usurp it.

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<sup>4</sup> The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: James. John MacArthur, Jr. 1998. Moody Press, Chicago. page 217.