

Wisdom and Warnings: The Book of James

Grace to the Humble

James 4:4-6

Mark Vroegop

You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:4–6).

I love it when the Bible speaks very specifically to where we live. There are few things more thrilling to me than when I see something in the Scriptures, and I discover how practically helpful it is. My goal in preaching is to help you look at the text so that you can see the glory of God and then know how to live. Expository preaching should help you look and live!

When “look and live” happens, our confidence in the Bible grows. Our hearts are led to worship in new ways. And we have hope.

This is why I love being a pastor and why I love the Church—especially this church. Our mission of *igniting a passion to follow Jesus* is simply the outgrowth of the weekly application of the Bible. Sometimes it is less dramatic. Faithful preaching and listening results in a subtle change of mind and heart over time. And then there are moments like last week, where we just sense the unique practical relevance to where we live.

We talked about quarrels, fights, and umbrellas last week. And I received an unusual number of emails identifying the ways that you applied the caution about misplaced affections, unbridled frustrations, and manipulative pride. I heard about your “umbrella” stories. And I smiled when some of you sent me images of what you did with the three questions from last week.

I really like the book of James because of its clarity, boldness, and hope.

Our text today continues the direct application regarding the problem of quarrels and fights. It issues a strong warning and also provides unbelievable hope.

The question last week was, “Where do quarrels come from?” And while I gave you three reasons, they are all interconnected to the issue of self-centered pride. The question underneath this text is, “What should we do?” Allow me to give you two answers with more to follow after Easter:

- 1) Take this seriously
- 2) Humbly seek God's grace

Let's explore James 4:4-6 together.

1. Take This Seriously

Verse four is shocking, isn't it? He just told his readers that their pride is affecting their prayer life—either by not praying or by asking with the wrong motives. That's a pretty direct statement designed to bring conviction. But, apparently, James doesn't believe this is strong enough. He intends to "rock their world" a bit.

He calls them "adulterous people." Wow! Now, this is not the first time James has used blunt language. He called religion without controlling the tongue "worthless" (1:26). What's more, he called his readers "foolish" in 2:20 when they separated faith and works. So, we're not unfamiliar with James's blunt words.

To be clear, he's not calling them names. He's trying to help them understand the danger that threatens them. The context and the seriousness of the issue matters. You and I do the same thing in many different ways.

Consider, for example, a dad who is walking his kids to the car from Chipotle. As they cross the parking lot, one of the kids starts to dart for the car, not seeing the cars that coming around the building. It's fitting and right for him to talk loud, sternly, and authoritatively. If you were watching from the window—mid burrito bite—you'd commend him in your mind: "Whew, that was close! Good thing that dad was watching."

On the other hand, imagine if the dad is walking his kids to the car and they make it safely to the vehicle. What would you think if the child accidentally drops the drink carrier only to have his dad talk loudly, sternly, and authoritatively? You'd rightly be dismayed: "That's too much."

So, the issue in play, the urgency of it, and the seriousness all factor into the appropriateness of the words.

Why does he call them "adulterous people"? It's not because he has sexual ethics in mind. He's not calling out immorality. Rather, he's using a familiar Old Testament metaphor when it comes to God's relationship with his people. James is calling out spiritual unfaithfulness or spiritual idolatry.

Remember that James is the pastor of the Jerusalem church. He's writing to all Christians, but especially Jewish Christians. They would have been familiar with this metaphor because God frequently referred to Israel as his bride or his wife (see Isaiah 54:4-8). It was one of the ways that God attempted to help his people understand his affection for them and the covenantal relationship that they shared.

Throughout Israel's history, God equated the worship of other gods not only as idolatry but also as adultery. It was one of the ways that God wanted to teach his people about the priority of faithfulness

to him. He's saying, "You know the pain of adultery? It's what is happening when you worship other gods." The entire book of Hosea carries this theme:

And the LORD said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins" (Hosea 3:1).

By using the term "adulterous people" James is helping them and us to realize the significance of what our prideful fights and quarrels are all about. When we allow self-centeredness and pride to cause us to love the wrong things, to give in to our frustrations, and to even manipulate God, it's just another form of idolatry.

James uses this strong term because there's a tendency to minimize or excuse sinful fights and quarrels. They're so common in the world and seem so justified when we're upset that it's hard to remember what our fights say about our relationship with God. James cuts through this to remind us how serious this really is by connecting it to spiritual adultery.

But he also connects "friendship with the world" and "enmity with God." The word for "friendship" is a word that indicates brotherly affection. It's a form of love. You could think of it as the kind of affection that draws you to, when you see a friend, go toward them. James is aware of our temptation to flirt with the world's ways of doing things. A few weeks ago, I called this the "dark arts." And it is something that we have to be continually mindful of because it's so easy and tempting to act just like everyone else.

This week I read a very interesting comment from a former leader of a denomination. He wrote:

I hate the politics of {my denomination}. And I don't say that as an outsider. I say that as an insider these last four years. Some of the lowest points in my leadership have been when I found myself participating in them – jockeying for position, continual self-promotion, backroom deals followed by spin in the front room, strategizing like brothers are your enemy, feeling like others see you as their enemy – getting to the point where you wonder if you can trust anyone even as you start to wonder how trustworthy you've become. I want to urge you, by the grace of God with the help of God, to rise above it for the mission of God and for the glory of God.¹

I share this with you not to throw shade on any denomination, but for all of us to realize how crazy-easy it is to play that game.

James is issuing a strong warning here. He knows the tug. He understands the temptation. He lives in Jerusalem – the seat of religious and political power. He warns us to be mindful of where we live and what our posture needs to be toward this world.

Do you know what James means by being a friend of the world? It means that you love the things of the world or the value set of the world (1 John 2:15). It means that you have a greater affection for the pleasures of this life than for God (2 Tim. 3:4). Loving the world is often connected to money, position,

¹ <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/platts-imb-farewell-rise-above-sbc-challenges/>

and power (Matt. 6:24). And the challenge is that none of those things are inherently wrong. They are all gifts from God. The problem is when our affections, attitudes, and actions begin to look indistinguishable from the world. It's when we allow the subtleties of our idolatry to inform how we act, especially when we're afraid or in conflict. Remember that James is saying this after a section on quarreling and fighting.

Friendship with the world emerges in many ways, but especially when desires collide. It's serious.

The last strong point that James makes is less about God's people and more about him. Verse 5 is a complicated verse. Some translations (like the CSB) see it as a reference to the divinely created passions within us which can go either way. The ESV and NIV see it as saying that God desires for your spirit to be set in the right direction—toward him!

In other words, there's a real battle within you. If you are not a Christian, I hope that you understand what James is saying here. I pray that you'll come to appreciate the real struggle happening inside of you over which path you are going to choose or which kingdom you are going to live for. I hope that this tension will lead you to trust in Jesus.

And for those of you who are Christians, we need to remember what's on the line here. We need to feel the weight of James's words. We need to realize the environment in which we live. When conflicts arise, when desires are strong, when opinions are many, and when fears rise up—we need to ask ourselves what this moment says about us.

I'm not calling you to live in guilt. We're going to get to the solution in a moment. But this text does call us to be aware. Take this seriously!

1) Humbly Seek His Grace

The second bold statement that James makes here is loaded with hope. I'm ready for some hope—how about you? What follows in verse 6 is the divinely-given remedy to the prideful, self-centered kind of living that creates all kinds of quarrels and fights.

“But he gives more grace.”

Could there be five more hopeful words? I want to unpack each of those words, but I want to give you a word picture in your mind. So much of our tensions, fears, frustrations, etc. come from the “gaps” in life. And it is our striving to bridge those gaps that cause us to act in a manner that is outside of God's will or plan.

So imagine yourself standing in front a “gap.” And then imagine that these words are like cement pillars upon which a bridge is built. Let's call it “Humility Bridge.” Undergirding it are five key words:

But – Don't take this word for granted! It is a word that denotes a contrast, a change, or an alternative. Those of you who've been around College Park for a while may remember how much Pastor Joe Bartemus loves this word. Just think of how often “but God” is mentioned in the Bible: “But God being

rich in mercy. . .made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:4). Every lament in the Bible has a turning point and it’s often the word “but.” Psalm 13:5, “But I have trusted in your steadfast love.” The word means that there’s another option and there’s an alternative path. So often we believe the lie that there is no other option. And yet tensions, fears, and conflicts provide an opportunity for us to be reminded of God’s ability to help us. Your only option is never just to sin.

He – This is obviously a reference to God himself. It’s important to remember the one who can help us. Over and over throughout the Psalms, we’re reminded about the confidence that we can have because of who God is. “*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*” (Psalm 27:1).

Gives – Here’s something incredibly important. We are reminded that the gaps in life are not going to be filled by our own ingenuity, by our creativity, by our forceful actions alone. God builds gaps into our lives in order to remind us that we need something that he gives. One of the reasons that we fall into wrong patterns of thinking and living is because we fail to connect our lives to our daily need for God’s help. Often our sinful reactions are due to the fact that we want what we want. We don’t want what God gives.

Moving forward through conflict and difficulty requires a faith-step that seeks what only God can provide.

Grace – I’m intentionally taking this word out of order. Do you know what “grace” is? A simple way to think of it is “the desire and ability to do God’s will.” It’s the favor of God given to you so that you are forgiven of your sins, right with him, and empowered to follow him faithfully. Grace is wanting to do God’s will. That, in itself, is a miracle. But it’s also the ability to do God’s will.

Jesus was full of grace and truth. And when we receive and live upon God’s grace, we are living like believers. A year ago I read in a book by Dallas Willard that, “. . .grace to godly is like breath.” We live upon and breathe God’s grace. Grace is divine empowerment to be like Jesus.

More – What a beautiful word! James desires for us to understand that the miracle of God is not just that he’s poured out grace to us in Christ. But he’s also ready to pour out even more grace upon us. One of the lies we believe in our sinful conflicts is that we are going to run out of grace. We think we’re not going to have enough. We imagine that God has forgotten us. We don’t see his help or we don’t see it in the time frame that we desire.

In our panic, pride, fear, and frustration we turn from God’s grace to our own way of doing things.

Imagine how your life could change if you could just believe that God has more grace to give you when you are facing the gaps of life?

Remember last week I told you to ask yourself what you wanted in the middle of a conflict? If you can identify it, that’s a great step. But let me invite you to take one more. Instead of merely identifying what you want, point your affections to God’s grace. In other words, strive to want God’s grace.

Ask yourself: “Do I want _____ or do I want God’s grace?”

The invitation is both an opportunity and a warning. “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” I’m sure you hear the caution here. To be on the wrong side of God all you have to do is think of yourself in a way that doesn’t reflect who God is and who you are.

Andrew Murray says, “The truth is this—pride must die in you, or nothing of heaven can live in you. . .Do not look at pride as only an unbecoming temper, nor at humility as only a decent virtue. The one is death, and the other is life; the one is all hell, the other is all heaven.”²

Therefore, the main battle—not the only battle—is for humble hearts.

Last week, I invited you to ask three questions regarding quarrels and fights. This week, I’m challenging you to remember one key thought: “He gives more grace.”

- When you feel alone, he can give more grace
- What you want to strike back, he can give you more grace
- When you feel angry and want revenge, he can give you more grace
- When you are scared and feeling vulnerable, he can give you more grace
- When you need to absorb unfair treatment, he can give you more grace
- When you are battling worry about your future, he can give you more grace
- When you need to be lovingly truthful, he can give you more grace
- When you need to be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving, he can give you more grace
- When you are tempted to slander or revile back, he can give you more grace
- When you need to stand up for what’s right the right way, he can give you more grace
- When you are feeling insecure, he can give you more grace

This text could change how you think and how you live!

When controversy or conflict is in the air, take faithfulness to Christ seriously and humbly seek God’s face.

And before you fall into panic, fear, frustration, or sinful responses, remember: he gives more grace!

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² <https://kevincarson.com/2021/03/25/quotes-on-humility-by-andrew-murray/amp/>