

Lesson 4 | March 26, 2023

Warnings against Worldly Attitudes

Study Text: James 4:1–17

Central Truth: We become more Christlike as we humble ourselves before God.

Key Verse: James 4:10

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up (KJV).

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will adopt a lifestyle of humility.
- Students will learn to avoid the conflict created by pride.
- Students will learn how to seek God’s direction for their lives.

Introducing the Study

Say: Those who accept Christ and live under the direction of the Holy Spirit experience the transforming power of God. That transformation is reflected in changes in their words and actions, as discussed in previous lessons. But both words and actions are rooted in a person’s attitudes. Our attitudes impact our relationship with God and with others. James gave instructions regarding attitudes his readers needed to change so their prayers would be effective and their relationship with others would be pleasing to God.

Opening Activity—Contagious Attitudes

Ask. What examples can you give of attitudes that are contagious? How have attitudes of others affected your attitude? Have you ever spread a negative attitude to others?

Say: The attitude God is looking for in His people is humility. When we humble ourselves before Him, we will learn to trust Him with our needs, our futures, our families, and all that concerns us. Pride, the opposite of humility, is the root cause of most of the sin in the world. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The attitudes James dealt with in his Epistle are timeless. Pride led to the sin in the Garden when the serpent tempted Eve to eat the fruit to be like God. Pride continues to plague the human race as individuals and nations compete to be the best or the most powerful. Sadly, it is also the root of much conflict within the Church. God calls His people to humility and submission to His plan for our lives. As we fulfill His plan, we will find the key to true success.

Part 1—Pride Produces Conflict

Conflict with Others

James 4:1–3

Say: Pride is an attitude that produces much of the sin in the world. When we examine our own shortcomings, we will likely discover that pride is the basis for many of them. James speaks of the wrong motives that sometimes control our actions—including our prayers. Often, those wrong motives come from the pride within us that demonstrates itself in jealousy, conflicts, and scheming. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

God designed His Church to be a place where believers can come to find acceptance and relief from the pressures of sinful society. But if we are not careful, a church can exhibit qualities that are characteristic of the world, resulting in conflicts. While conflict is a part of life and can sometimes lead to creative solutions to problems, it can also be a distraction that derails spiritual growth. According to James, many serious conflicts—“quarrels and fights” (James 4:1, NLT)—come from evil desires within one or more of the people involved. When wrong desires rule our lives, those desires are in conflict with our consciences. This warring within ourselves then produces conflict with others.

Jealousy, or wanting what others have, is a symptom of pride within a person. James used strong language to call out his readers on this issue. He said, “You scheme and kill” (verse 2, NLT) to get what you want. While intense coveting can lead to murder, James was probably referring to hatred, which is equivalent to murder (see Matthew 5:21–22; 1 John 3:15). Even if literal murder never enters the picture, murder can happen in the figurative sense. Strong desires have often led people to destroy another’s reputation in order to get what they want, whether it is wealth, position, power, or something else.

James pointed out that his readers failed to pray to God, the Giver of good gifts (James 1:17). Even when they did pray, their motives were wrong because they were seeking worldly pleasure rather than God’s will for their lives.

Resource Packet Item 1: Pride, Jealousy, and Conflict

Distribute the case studies and ask half the class to work on the first scenario and the other half to work on the other. Then discuss the answers together.

Discuss

- ? How is the sin of coveting (jealousy) a result of pride?
- ? Why were some of James’s readers not receiving answers to their prayers?

Enemy of God

James 4:4–6

Say: Pride leads us to strive for acceptance and friendship of the world. However, the enemy of our souls is ruler of the world (John 12:31), and friendship with the world makes us enemies of God. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Those who are unfaithful to God and love the world are spiritual adulterers (James 4:4). A craving for things of the world indicates friendship with the world and hatred toward God (see Matthew 6:24).

The word world refers to the values and desires of a world system that either opposes God or denies His existence. This includes self-gratification and the removal of any moral or spiritual restraints. When this type of attitude creeps into the life of a believer, a coldness for the things of God and a love for the pleasures of this world soon develop.

Some Bible versions indicate that “spirit” in James 4:5 refers to the Holy Spirit who indwells each believer. They also interpret the phrase “lusteth to envy” (KJV) to mean God loves humanity with such passion that He will not share His place with anything or anyone else. The translators of the New Living Translation took this approach: “God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him” (verse 5, NLT). God is “a jealous God” (Exodus 20:5; see 34:14). Throughout much of the Old Testament, the rebellion of the Israelites had to do with their worship of idols, sometimes mixing idol worship with the worship of God himself. Our friendship with the values of the world is just as idolatrous as the false worship in the Old Testament.

The word envy though, always has a negative meaning in the New Testament. Some commentators, then, interpret James 4:5 as a reference to our human spirit. Left unchecked, it has a natural tendency toward sin (see verses 1–2). But as believers, we do not need to follow the inclination of the human spirit. We have divine help—God’s grace. Regardless of the interpretation of verse 5, the underlying message is that when we adopt the values of the world in order to be accepted by it, then we are choosing to make ourselves enemies of God.

According to verse 6, God resists those who proudly follow their human tendencies toward sin. These people place themselves above God and others. But God gives grace to those who humbly submit their lives to Him. And it is through this grace that we can overcome the tendency toward sin brought about by our human nature.

Discuss

? How is friendship with the world related to our pride?

? In what ways are believers tempted to have friendship with the world?

Part 2—The Need for Humility

Humility before God

James 4:7–10

Say: The opposite of pride is humility. Without humility, we cannot truly know God, nor can we resist the temptations of the devil. Living in humility instead of pride changes our priorities, our behavior, and our words. We must recognize our total dependence on God for our salvation and for everything we need in this life. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

If we want to overcome sin, we must humble ourselves before or submit to God (James 4:7). The word submit (KJV) is a military term that means “get into your proper rank.” When we surrender our lives to God, we depend on Him to guide us with wisdom and authority. James also realized the source of our temptation to sin. If we are to overcome sin, we must “resist the devil” (verse 7). When we resist his influence and depend on God, the devil will flee from us.

Drawing near to God includes at least three things. The first is confessing our sins, because sin will keep us from drawing closer to God. Second, we draw near to God by reading His Word in order to know Him and to learn how to obey and please Him. And third, as we commune daily with God in prayer, we are drawn closer to Him. In addition, by being faithful to our church, we will receive the teaching and fellowship that we need.

Drawing closer to God also requires purity. Cleansing our hands and hearts is a reminder of the Old Testament cleansing of the priests before serving in the tabernacle (see Exodus 30:19–21; Leviticus 16:4). For the believer, though, this cleansing refers to spiritual cleanliness to serve the Lord with a pure heart (see Psalm 86:11, NLT).

The actions described in James 4:9 speak of repentance. We must be sorry for our sins and change our lifestyle. Remember, all sin is ultimately against God. True repentance will bring tears of sorrow because we have transgressed God’s holy commands (see 2 Corinthians 7:10).

In James 4:10, James returned to the thought of humility presented in verse 6. There are always those who try to exalt themselves through strife, envy, and a self-seeking attitude. But when we humble ourselves before God, He will reveal our worth and exalt us in His sight.

Discuss

? What practical things can you do to come closer to God?

? What areas of your life might you need to change to be humble before God?

Resource Packet Item 2: The “Why” and “How” of Humility

Distribute the worksheet and ask one person to read each of the passages aloud. Then discuss what they say about why humility is needed and how you can practice it.

No Right to Judge

James 4:11–12

Say: Judging others is one of the most prideful things believers do. When we set ourselves up as judges of other believers, we are placing ourselves not only above them, but above God's Law as well. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

James had already talked about the importance of controlling one's speech (James 3:1–12). He returned to that theme in the middle of his discussion of pride and humility by warning believers not to speak evil of one another. This includes slander, damaging someone's reputation with false charges, or even saying something true about someone in an unkind, critical, or harsh manner. Gossip—even in the form of a prayer request—would be included in this evil speaking.

James condemned speaking evil of fellow believers because to do so would be to judge that person. Such speech is also speaking evil of or judging the Law. He was probably referring to Leviticus 19:18: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (NLT). A believer criticizing another believer is violating this law. By that action the person is stating that this law is unnecessary, even though Jesus called it the second greatest commandment (see Mark 12:31).

Those who judge the Law in this way are assuming authority that belongs only to God. As the Lawgiver (James 4:12), He rewards those who obey Him and brings judgment on those who do not.

This does not mean believers cannot evaluate whether a behavior or belief is right or wrong, but we must be redemptive in nature, avoiding critical, prideful judgment that condemns others. We must make sure we are working to build up each other and encourage one another in the faith (see Jude 20).

Discuss

? How does judging others show the existence of pride in our own lives?

? What is the difference between godly correction within the Church and prideful judgment of other believers?

Part 3—Guard against Presumption Confidence in Self

James 4:13–14

Say: Today's culture tends to encourage self-confidence and self-sufficiency. We want our children to grow up to be successful in their families, academic pursuits, and careers. We save money and plan for retirement as though such plans will ensure our happiness for the future. While planning for the future is wise, those plans must be balanced with an understanding of our weakness and dependence on God. Our true confidence must be in Him, not in ourselves. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Successful people sometimes begin to believe they are in control of their own futures. But Scripture does not guarantee tomorrow—let alone another year—to any person. James 4:13 warns those who believe they control their own destinies.

Making plans for the future is not wrong if done with a reliance on God. He is a God of planning and order. As we seek Him, He can guide our planning. Such planning for the future can help us fulfill God's will for our lives. However, setting personal, family, business, or church goals without first seeking God's direction shows a lack of respect for God's plan.

The kind of planning James mentioned in verse 13 is based on worldly wisdom and confidence in self rather than trust in God. This attitude does not take into account the brevity of life. In light of eternity, life on earth is like the morning fog that vanishes as the sun warms the air (verse 14). No one can foresee all of the circumstances of life. We do not know what will happen tomorrow, next week, or next year. To make plans without considering God, who alone knows the future, is both foolish and faithless.

Discuss

? Should Christians make plans for the future? If so, how?

? Why is the attitude found in James 4:13 detrimental to our spiritual well-being?

Confidence in God

James 4:15–17

Say: Perhaps you have known someone who faced extreme adversity but demonstrated a quiet confidence that seemed incongruent with the situation. Or you may know someone who is blessed in amazing ways without seeming to struggle for the success they are achieving. Both of these scenarios are possible when we place our faith in God. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

People sometimes believe serving God guarantees personal and financial success. That is simply not true. However, God offers peace, strength, and spiritual fruitfulness when we trust Him and follow His direction.

When we begin to make plans for the future, we need to consider God's will (James 4:15). He knows what is best for each believer, and He also knows the gifts and abilities He has given each of us. As we seek His will for our lives, He will direct us so we can be fruitful.

Those who leave God out of their plans often brag about their accomplishments (verse 16). They believe they control their own destinies. For them to rejoice in their success is evil, because that success is based on temporal, earthly living rather than dependence on God.

So how do we balance depending on God and putting forth the necessary effort to take care of ourselves and our families? Think for a moment about the simple act of eating. Where does the food come from? How is it prepared? God expects people to plant, harvest, and prepare food so they can eat it. Yet it is God who provides seed, makes it grow, and gives strength to people to do the work. Dependence on God is often as simple as acknowledging and thanking Him as the Source of all things as we work with all He has provided so our needs can be met.

James concluded his teaching on the necessity of doing God's will with a warning. While verse 17 can be applied to many areas of life, we need to look at it in context. In verses 13–16, James warned against self-sufficiency and boasting. Therefore, failure to acknowledge God's right to determine our plans and future is a sin of omission.

Discuss

? What are some of the ways God shows us His will for our lives?

? How does having confidence in God help us when we face adverse circumstances?

Resource Packet Item 3: Making Personal Plans

Distribute the case study, and divide your class into small groups. Give them a few minutes to read the case study and answer the questions. Then ask the groups to share their responses and discuss them as a class.

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: As believers, our lives should run counter to the values of a worldly culture. Instead of being proud and self-sufficient, we should be humble and dependent on God. Instead of making plans based on selfish goals and motives, we should seek God's direction both in the plans we make and the way we implement them. Every part of our lives should reflect the values of God's kingdom rather than the values of the world.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- If you have a conflict with someone that you have not yet addressed, take steps to resolve it and be reconciled.
- Ask God to help you recognize areas in which you need more humility.
- Examine your personal goals in light of God's direction to be sure you are putting your confidence in Him.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Abstain from Sinful Relationships.
Numbers 33:50–55

Tuesday:

Do Not Imitate the World.
1 Samuel 8:19–22

Wednesday:

Worldliness Will Be Judged.

2 Kings 17:7–18

Thursday:

Don't Worry!

Matthew 6:25–34

Friday:

Reference Guard against Greed.

Luke 12:13–21

Saturday:

Be Heavenly Minded.

Colossians 3:1–3