

Sunday, March 1, 2026 pm

Studies Through James (13)

WARS AMONG YOU

James 4:1-12 (1)

Tonight, we continue our study through the book of James. As we have noted, this book is filled with practical admonitions for living the Christian life. In recent lessons we have addressed the power and danger of the tongue (3:1-12), and contrasted the wisdom of God with earthly wisdom (3:13-18). Tonight, we want to talk about wars we need to address.

I. Where do wars and fights come from?

- a. War is always an ugly thing. And while at times necessary (to achieve peace when facing a bully), it is NEVER something we ought to desire. When we think of physical wars – we think of death, torture, cruelty, destruction, devastation, etc. No one in his right mind wants physical war.
- b. The wars addressed in this lesson are of a different sort – wars with spiritual consequences. Here we see “wars” on 3 fronts – against one another as brethren, within ourselves and against God. ALL 3 need to be addressed and in our text they are interrelated.
- c. Within context, recall the words of James 3:17-18 which describes the wisdom from above as being *FIRST pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.* He contrasted that with the earthly, sensual and demonic wisdom of this world. NOW James uses “wars” (contentions, battles) and fights (conflict, strife) to indict some within his audience. Clearly, some Christians to whom he was writing had a problem. Was it Jew vs. Gentile, wealth vs. poor, or something else? It doesn’t matter. James is using STRONG language to drive home the point that what they were doing was both wrong and unproductive!

II. Our Personal War (Within)

- a. *Desires that war within your members* (1-2a)- “Wars” or strife and contention almost always start within.
 - i. Someone, and often BOTH or ALL parties involved, are guilty. They are the product of selfishness. They originate with our desire for pleasure.
 - ii. They are the product of lusts (another word for one’s own desires). While the word desire can have a positive connotation (cf. Luke 22:15 – *With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover...*), when the term “lust” or “covet” is used, it is negative. That is here. Recall James 1:12-15 – temptations toward sin come from these desires.
 - iii. *That war in your members* – a battle for your heart and mind. Be reminded that this is where sinful lusts (and godly behaviors) begin – cf. Matthew 15:17-20. This also reminds us that Satan is seeking to take you down – 1 Peter 5:8
 - iv. *And do not have* – God is NOT going to give you that which is spiritually harmful (though He will not stop you from finding it if you are so determined – AS IN this text).
- b. *You murder and covet and cannot obtain.* (2b) This is challenging because is James saying they were literally murdering others (or each other), OR is it hyperbole? Likely the later. I think of the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:21-22 – You have heard that it was said... We are dealing with strife among brethren and the consequences. Recall also 1 John 3:15, *We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.*
- c. *Selfish and faithless prayers* (2c-3) – James observes to failures in their prayers.

- i. They were NOT asking for the types of things they ought to be asking for and without faith(fulness) – wisdom (James 1:5-8); humility, love, unity, for one another, etc. When it comes to our prayers, we sometimes fail to go to God for help. Remember James 1:17 – every good and perfect gift comes from above... Also 1 John 5:14-15 – according to His will.
 - ii. They were selfishly praying for their personal wants – This is not as much about asking for God’s help with needs, but the motives behind those requests. These are for selfish pursuits – possibly self-promotion over those they were warring with, or just the things you want. The “prosperity gospel” implies that God wants to bless you with materialism. This verse debunks that describing one wanting things for their own pleasure. NOTE: Sometimes we might be trying to hide our motives even from ourselves – e.g., “If I had a better car, I could do so much more for the Lord.” Or someone seeking a shortcut to overcoming some weakness (even though that shortcut removes the blessings of the pain that makes success that much more meaningful).
- d. *Friendship with the world... (4)*
- i. *Adulterers and adulteresses* – again the question – is he literal or figurative? Again, as with murder, James is likely appealing to their unfaithfulness to God. If his audience was Jewish they would have been familiar with the number of times YHWH described Israel as an unfaithful spouse – esp. Hosea 1-3 where he is commanded to marry a harlot who conceives out of wedlock. Also Jeremiah 2:20, “*For of old I have broken your yoke and burst your bonds; And you said, ‘I will not transgress,’ When on every high hill and under every green tree You lay down, playing the harlot.*” You might also consider how the church is described as the bride of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:22-33). When we live in sin, we are being unfaithful to God. This is the language James is using.
 - ii. NOTE: The earlier texts only use the word adulteresses. Some later MSS add the word for Adulterer (male). This could be the well intentioned effort of a scribe to not make this about women only. One proposed thought is a scribe included the male equivalent as a side note. But later scribes seeing the side note, thought it was inadvertently left out so he incorporated it into the mss. While well intentioned, it is not necessary. Either way, the point indicts ALL who are guilty!
 - iii. *Friendship with the world* - Here is the problem we must face DEEP DOWN! Are we trying to please 2 masters? Matthew 6:24. 1 John 2:15-17 again reminds us that we cannot love the world and God.
 - iv. NOTE: Recall also the idea of friendship goes deeper than just an acquaintance. Jesus told His apostles on the night of His betrayal, that they were no longer just servants, but friends. Paul was clear that we cannot isolate ourselves from the world – 1 Corinthians 5:9-10. How else will we be able to influence the world for God. BUT there is a difference between being in the world and putting yourself into a circumstance where the world is likely to draw you away.
 - v. *Whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God* – NOW James turns the “war” picture toward one’s relationship with God – enmity means one is your enemy or out of favor with you. It is a hostile environment. In fact, James then says, a friend of the world is an enemy of God.
- e. *You will NOT win! VS. 5-6*
- i. Do you want to go to war with God? In these verses, James is clear that you will NOT win!
 - ii. Vs. 5 James appeals to scripture. This verse is challenging as there is not plain text in the Old Testament (or New) that gives this quote. There are at least 3 possibilities:
 - 1. Could he be quoting a writing that we do not have (it is possible they had other inspired writings)?

2. More likely, he is appealing to concepts about God they would have been familiar with – such as God being a jealous God (cf. Deuteronomy 32:16, 21, etc.) related to idolatry (unfaithful harlotry).
3. Vs. 5 is leading up to his quote in vs. 6. This could be describing man (note in the original, “spirit” can mean many things, including the Holy Spirit OR the spirit within a man. Man puts the capital letter there by interpretation. This could be the disposition of men who are following their own pursuits and thus are unfaithful to God (and Jesus) – cf. Genesis 6:5 & 8:21 which both speak of man’s heart being inclined toward evil.
4. In vs. 6 James first notes, that God grace is greater than what man does. He then quotes from Proverbs 3:34, *Surely He scorns the scornful, But gives grace to the humble.*

And thus James identifies a problem, which some see as the crux of this entire letter. But next he gives the solution in 7 parts: 1) Submit to God; 2) Resist the devil; 3) Draw near to God; 4) Cleanse yourselves; 5) Purify your hearts; 6) Lament and mourn (truly repent) and 7) Humble yourselves in His sight so that He can lift you up. In our next lesson, we will focus on this solution.

The world is a war with God and Jesus. And we are in that war, whether we like it or not (Ephesians 6:10-18, 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, 1 Timothy 6:12, etc.). The only question is, Whose side are you on? Think about it!