

In the previous passage James had introduced us to the two kinds of wisdom: earthly and heavenly. He told us that earthly wisdom often was an expression of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. He may have had in mind some people who were trying to be leaders in the church. He taught that the result of earthly wisdom that was selfishly ambitious and jealous would result in disorder and every vile practice. By contrast heavenly wisdom is peaceable and gentle and produces a harvest of righteousness.

¹ What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? James 4:1 Elaborating on the disorder resulting from earthly wisdom, James tells us that the quarrels and fights spring from the passions at war within us. There is within us all a desire for pleasure. God put a hunger in our hearts that only He can truly satisfy. The world offers one kind of pleasure that is very self-focused. God offers another kind that is outward focused on Him, and those created in His image (Mark 12:33ⁱ). Our old nature is at war within us tempting us with what would please our carnal nature (Romans 7:23ⁱⁱ). That does not mean all physical pleasures are evil. They are evil when they are out of God's boundaries and when they become the priority of our lives. We find ourselves somewhat satisfied with them, but then we need more the next time, whether a drug or money or sex, satisfaction is seen as a little more. Someone asked a very wealthy person how much money was enough. Their answer was, "A little bit more." The flesh nature is never content with what it has (Hebrews 13:5ⁱⁱⁱ).

The Greek word translated pleasure is the source of our word hedonism. John MacMurray said, "The best cure for hedonism is the attempt to practice it."^{iv} Hedonism will always leave you wanting more, while destroying you in the process.

Our born-again spirit longs for communion with Jesus, to fellowship with God's people. We find pleasure in being God's instrument. We experience deep joy when we worship or when God works through us to encourage or witness to people.

These two different means of pleasure are at war within us. Paul described this war within us to the Galatians. *¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.* Galatians 5:17 If the Spirit always won out, there would be no fights or quarrels within the church. But we know that is not always the case. Wherever there are humans, there are problems because of our selfish nature, even in the church.

I thank the Lord that there has been very little of this in our church body in the last two decades! What a blessing. But every other church I have attended over the years had some serious conflict, and it always went back to what is described in this verse. Either there are those who insist on their way, which is the pleasure of self-importance, or there are those who compromise with sinful pleasures of a physical nature. **James summed it up as disorder and every vile practice.**

We have this dilemma in the church of being welcoming to all but having to confront disorder and sinful behavior. Even those who have been in the Word for years may find they are justifying selfish behavior as standing for the truth. Our flesh is very conniving and deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9^v). Confronting this disorder must be done gently and with grace. Yet, no matter how faithfully we follow the Lord's leading, some conflicts

will end in division. The wars that take place in the world and in the church are all a result of the war within our own hearts.

² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. James 4:2 I do not think there were murders going on in the church over who should lead, though some commentators think it had gotten to that point. Rather, I think James was describing it as Jesus did, that to hate someone in God's sight was murder (1 John 3:15^{vi}). We do refer to character assassination. It is spreading lies to bring a person down. Then the accuser can take their coveted place.

Coveting is to passionately want something, to be fixated on it. That often ends in fighting and quarreling (Exodus 20:17^{vii}). Frustrated that someone has what we so desire stirs up resentment resulting in fighting. Or perhaps you presume the person has done evil things, so you let others know, but the motive is to take their place. The problem is that we will reap what we have sown (Galatians 6:7^{viii}). Someone will come along and lie about us.

James asks why we do not just ask. Well, if we did, it would expose our selfish ambitions. We do not ask God because we know He knows the motives of our hearts. Why would we dare come before the Lord and ask for what we imagine will satisfy us? He is the last thing we want to think about when contemplating questionable desires.

³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. James 4:3 If we have the audacity to ask, or perhaps in the ignorance of the holy nature of God we do dare ask, we will not get it because God already knows what we would do with it. He will not give us something that will harm us or keep us from Him. And if we do not think He sees our heart, think again! Even when we do not think we will spend it on our passions, He knows when we will and, in His mercy, withholds it from us. However, if we are insistent in our rebellion, He may grant our request and send leanness to our soul (Psalm 106:15 KJV^{ix}).

How do we spend the gifts of God on our passions, you might ask? Every created thing of God that brings pleasure can become the thing we turn to for our ultimate satisfaction, in other words, the thing we live for. The things we tend to prioritize include money, sex, power, food, nature, entertainment, and the list goes on and on. They are good gifts when used in their proper place and recognized as a gift from the One who deserves to be first in our lives. He is the source of all pleasure. The psalmist declared that at His right hand are pleasures forevermore (Psalm 16:11^x)! Surveys have shown that the most contented people are those who practice a biblical lifestyle.^{xi} Glorifying God and our desire for satisfaction can go hand in hand when He is our source of pleasure.

When we replace Jesus as our passion with any gift from Him, we are in rebellion toward our Maker. We leave our first love for a transient thing. When those things become the things that dominate our thoughts and direct our actions, we have turned the things into idols (Jeremiah 2:13^{xii}). We have a new god, little g. We read about the Israelites doing this with some pagan god and wonder how they could do such a thing, not realizing we are doing the same.

⁴ 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. James 4:4 To understand how the recipients of the letter would have understood these words, we need to get a Biblical definition. John the Beloved tells us what the world is in 1 John 2:15-17. *¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world,*

the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ or all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. Fondness toward the world and love of the Father are antithetical. Jesus said, ¹⁸ *“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.* John 15:18,19

Each is the enemy of the other. Our affections cannot be fixed on the things of this world, on pride, and lust and at the same time on loving God. Jesus said, *“You cannot love God and money.”* Matthew 6:24^{xiii} One will prevail to the exclusion of the other. We should begin each day asking ourselves whom we choose to love. To Whom or what have we covenanted our love? You cannot worship your ego or your cravings and God at the same time. We live for self or for Him.

Throughout the Old Testament, **worshiping other gods was referred to as adultery** (Jeremiah 3:9^{xiv}). That is because God was the husband of the nation (Isaiah 54:5^{xv}). Idolatry was being unfaithful to the Provider and Protector of the nation. James is saying that the person who sees this world system that is under the power of Satan as his or her pleasure has joined the forces opposing God (2 Corinthians 4:4^{xvi}). Jews rejected the One who gave them the land, protected them from enemies, nurtured them with His Word, gave them laws that guided them to a healthy and prosperous life, in covenant with them. And yet, they decided wealth and possessions were the passions of their hearts.

Brother Luke preached through Hosea. If you missed that series, you can find it on my web site: www.bible-sermons.org. Hosea was commanded by God to marry a woman named Gomer (Hosea 1:2,3^{xvii}). She had two children with him, but then she would leave and find other lovers. He would go and find her and bring her back. She would leave again. Finally, she was so destitute from her lifestyle that she ended up in slavery. Hosea *bought* her back (Hosea 3:1,2^{xviii}). God was showing Israel through the life of Hosea how unfaithful they had been to Him. He was also showing how consistent and merciful His love is for us. He gives undeserved grace when we listen to our wandering heart.

James is telling the churches that some of us have taken a similar path to that of Gomer. We can see that is the case when we read the letters from Jesus to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 (Revelation 2:4^{xix}). We saw in the previous chapter idolatry with the praise of man. Jesus’ letter to the church of Laodicea pointed out their satisfaction with the material world when they were in such desperate need of what Jesus could provide for them (Revelation 3:17,18^{xx}).

Lest we think that we should become monks who deprive ourselves of all pleasure, Paul’s letter to Timothy gives us the godly attitude. ¹⁷ *As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.* 1 Timothy 6:17 Did you hear that? God has richly provided us with everything to enjoy. We enjoy the gifts in moderation, not setting our heart on them, but thanking God for His goodness and grace. The pleasures that God provides in His creation may come and go, but His love is always with us. He will never leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5^{xxi}).

If pleasures the world provides are your aim each day, you are an enemy of God. Or as Paul wrote to Timothy, *“she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives.”* 1 Timothy 5:6 You have become an enemy of God. James was writing to Christians! It is a

sober warning that though we are redeemed, we can fall for the allure of this sin sick world system run by Satan (1 John 5:19^{xxii}). Paul described these wayward believers in his letter to the Philippians. *18 For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.* Philippians 3:18,19 Paul and James have presented us with the clear possibility that though we are in church each week and call ourselves a Christian, we may be living as an enemy of Christ. This challenges us to ask ourselves what we truly desire. Is it more of this world or more of Jesus? Where have we set our affections (Colossians 3:1,2^{xxiii})?

5 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”? James 4:5 This is a very difficult verse for several reasons. First, it says that it is from Scripture, and yet we can find no such source. God does tell Israel that He is a jealous God (Exodus 20:5^{xxiv}; 34:14^{xxv}). It is part of the Ten Commandments. Unlike human jealousy, His desire for us is based purely on His love for us and not wanting us to be seduced by the world because it is harmful to us. He wants us to be as passionate toward Him as He is toward us because of His unselfish love.

The other problem is the translation. The Greek does not distinguish between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit. One must decide by the context which is being referred to. Translators come down on both sides. NIV translates it as the human spirit tending to envy and be jealous. ESV and RSV translates it as God yearning over our human spirit. NKJV and Living Bible translate it as the Holy Spirit, whom God has placed in us, watches over us with tender jealousy. I lean toward the last of these interpretations.

First, we must understand that we are a triune being, body, soul, and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23^{xxvi}). The unconverted soul has a lifeless spirit. There is no breath of God that brings life to the spirit until we accept the forgiveness Jesus offers us (John 20:22^{xxvii}). That is why we must repent, to reverse the course of our lives. Then the Holy Spirit brings to life our spirit. You could say that our spirit is an empty house until the Holy Spirit fills it (1 Corinthians 6:19^{xxviii}). We previously operated out of soul, which is our mind, will, and emotions. Now we let the Holy Spirit in our spirit direct our soul which then directs our body. Seen in this way, we can begin to get a sense of God’s longing jealously for us to be wholly His. What a beautiful verse on His love for us!

Even when we sin, when we act like Gomer, when we lust after the things of this world, the heart of God is grieving over our lack of love for Him, over our unfaithfulness to yield to His Spirit in us. We go from Him being our satisfaction to trying to have our emptiness filled with God’s temporary gifts. He yearns jealously over the Spirit he put in us being ignored. It is as if our spouse quit speaking to us. He longs to be intimate with us again, to have our attention. Knowing how our waywardness grieves the God who loves us so much should act as a deterrent to looking anywhere else for satisfaction.

Brothers and sisters, if you realized how much you are loved, how God longs for you to see the greatness of His love for you, the extent to which He has gone to make you His own, you would never try to be satisfied with the lying promises of temptations. *This jealous Spirit is inside us. When we sin, he is pained! Furthermore, his jealousy is passionate, for the idea in the Greek is that he longs or yearns for us with an intense jealousy. To realize that the awesomely holy God who transcends the universe and is wholly other and self-contained is at the same time personally and passionately and lovingly jealous for our affection—this realization ought to stop any of our “affairs” with*

the world and cause us to prostrate our souls adoringly before him. How we are loved! And how we ought to love! For as John informs us, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19^{xxx}).^{xxx} God knows that when we fall for the tempting lies of satisfaction from this world, we will be making ourselves His enemy, rejecting His love.

A modern song captures the sense of this verse. He is jealous for me. Loves like a hurricane, I am a tree, bending beneath the weight of His wind and mercy. All of the sudden I am unaware of these afflictions eclipsed by glory, And I realize just how beautiful You are and how great your affection is for me. O, how He loves us so! How He loves us! How He loves us all.^{xxxi}

⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." James 4:6 The fact that God is jealous over the spirit He made to dwell in us is a doubly gracious thing. He created us beings with a spirit so that one day after we fell, He could have a home in us by the presence of the Holy Spirit. ²³ *Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.* John 14:23 How gracious is that undeserved blessing? But then the fact that He is so jealous for us is another blessing of grace. But He gives more grace! How? He opposes the proud. His opposition to the proud is a chance for us to be humbled and enter that grace. It is that opposition the prideful encounter that gives them a chance to humble themselves and enter this beautiful relationship of love, to be the humble people who receive this undeserved love.

James does not pull his punches. He calls it like it is. That can leave us feeling like we are too far gone, that is until we read verse 6a, *"But He gives more grace!"* John wrote that of the fullness of Jesus have all we received, and grace heaped upon grace (John 1:16^{xxxii}). No matter how far or how long we have fallen, He yearns over the spirit He has put in us with jealousy. He wants you back in His arms. He wants to be your everything. Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds (Romans 5:20^{xxxiii}).

*He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater;
He sendeth more grace when the labours increase;
To added afflictions He addeth His mercy,
To multiplied trials His multiplied peace.
When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done:
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.
His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,
His power has no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.
(Annie Johnson Flint)^{xxxiv}*

Has your proud heart deceived you into thinking the things of this world are what you should live for? Ask for grace to see what truly matters. Is there a stubborn weakness that declares you are not surrendered to the love of God? Ask for grace to see His great love for you. Have you failed to love Jesus first and foremost? Ask for grace to do so. Hear this promise: *If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.* 1 John 5:14b

Questions:

- 1 What causes fights and quarrels?
- 2 What is the result of these fights?
- 3 Why do we not ask or receive?
- 4 What does the world refer to?
- 5 What does adultery refer to?
- 6 How does one turn into an enemy of God?
- 7 What is so difficult about verse 5?
- 8 Which spirit is James referring to?
- 9 What does this tell us about God's love?
- 10 What is the answer to our condition?

ⁱ **Mark 12:33 (ESV)**

³³ And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

ⁱⁱ **Romans 7:23 (ESV)**

²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Hebrews 13:5 (ESV)**

⁵ Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

^{iv} John Blanchard, *Truth for Life* (West Sussex, England: H. E. Walter Ltd., 1982), p. 217. as quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991).

^v **Jeremiah 17:9 (ESV)**

⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

^{vi} **1 John 3:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

^{vii} **Exodus 20:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."

^{viii} **Galatians 6:7 (ESV)**

⁷ Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.

^{ix} **Psalms 106:15 (KJV)**

¹⁵ And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.

^x **Psalms 16:11 (KJV)**

¹¹ Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand *there are* pleasures for evermore.

^{xi} 2023 survey by NORC at the University of Chicago; "No matter the circumstances, those who trust in God and connect with him through Scripture are happier than those who haven't yet sought God in his Word." ABS

^{xii} **Jeremiah 2:13 (ESV)**

¹³ for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

^{xiii} **Matthew 6:24 (ESV)**

²⁴ "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

^{xiv} **Jeremiah 3:9 (ESV)**

⁹ Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree.

^{xv} **Isaiah 54:5 (ESV)**

⁵ For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.

^{xvi} **2 Corinthians 4:4 (ESV)**

⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

^{xvii} **Hosea 1:2-3 (ESV)**

² When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, “Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD.” ³ So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

^{xviii} **Hosea 3:1-2 (ESV)**

¹ 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.” ² So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley.

^{xix} **Revelation 2:4 (ESV)**

⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

^{xx} **Revelation 3:17-18 (ESV)**

¹⁷ For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.

^{xxi} **Hebrews 13:5 (ESV)**

⁵ Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

^{xxii} **1 John 5:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

^{xxiii} **Colossians 3:1-2 (ESV)**

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

^{xxiv} **Exodus 20:5 (ESV)**

⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me,

^{xxv} **Exodus 34:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God),

^{xxvi} **1 Thessalonians 5:23 (ESV)**

²³ Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

^{xxvii} **John 20:22 (ESV)**

²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.

^{xxviii} **1 Corinthians 6:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own,

^{xxix} **1 John 4:19 (ESV)**

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.

^{xxx} R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 178.

^{xxxi} How He Loves by David Crowder

^{xxxii} **John 1:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

^{xxxiii} **Romans 5:20 (ESV)**

²⁰ Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,

^{xxxiv} As quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 179.