

DISCUSSION GUIDE :: SESSION 7

LIVING WHAT WE BELIEVE
HUMILITY AND PRIDE
JAMES 4:1-6
03/12/2017



MAIN POINT

We must look to God and His grace to form healthy and encouraging relationships within the church.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

When it comes to conflict, are you more of a “mama bear” who will protect yourself or others at all costs, or do you tend to be a “sweeper-under-the-rug” who would rather not deal with the conflict?

How might our life experiences affect the way we deal with conflict?

Each of us has a natural tendency when it comes to dealing with conflict. As we discuss the appropriate ways to handle grievances against other members of the church body, we will discover there are times we want to sweep the situation under the rug and ignore it, but we can't. Just as dirt will not disappear from under a rug until someone removes it, conflict does not disappear until it is dealt with biblically.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 4:1-5.

What happens to a church or ministry that harbors a lot of quarrels and fights?

What is our individual responsibility to keep the ministry healthy?

These congregations seem to have been more pleasure-seekers than God-seekers. As a result, their lives were characterized by strife, self-indulgence, pride, envy, adultery, covetousness, lust, slander, and even murder. The picture is dismal. James talked about desire that is misdirected and sinful. When a person lives to satisfy the cravings of the heart and these cravings are not gratified, such a person can lash out in anger that sometimes leads even to murder.

When a lusty person fails in his or her quest to fulfill desired goals—whether for possessions, sexual gratification, reputation, power, or prestige—the result can be destructive. Coveting is another compelling feeling of desire. And when people have such strong cravings but do not have them satisfied, they often fight. The envy James mentioned shows the selfish pride of life that characterizes the worldly passion for personal satisfaction rather than passion for God and His purposes.

Why do you think James called the people “adulterous?”

How were the attitudes of the people aligned with the world instead of with God?

James may have been referring to the ultimate end of unchecked human cravings, pointing out to the believers of his day what worldly passions can lead to. But James did use “you” and “your” often in these verses to indicate that Christians can live with attitudes and actions that oppose God and His will for them. James clearly knew of Christians who were in conflict with other Christians; he referred to the wars and the fights among them. Christians who let their cravings rule push people out of their way to get what they want. And putting your interests above God’s always results in conflict.

Speaking metaphorically, he called them “adulteresses.” James was not talking about sexual but spiritual infidelity. And when he referred to the world, he did not have in mind the physical earth but the self-centered values of those who crave their satisfaction. Spiritual adultery is abandoning the worship of God for the worship of self. James was blunt about the relationship such people have with God—people who always seek their own gratification over love of God are God’s enemy because their actions show hostility toward God. The world’s goal is self-indulgence, self-fulfillment, and self-glory, which is hostility toward God.

Why do you think James look back to Scripture in verse 5? What impact might this have had on his audience?

In verse 5, James sought to back up what he asserted in verse 4. He referred to the general teaching of Scripture, not to a specific verse. It is difficult to translate James’ question, but the sense is that the Spirit (the Holy Spirit) who lives in believers yearns jealously that they might live for God and not for themselves. If the Scripture has made plain that God wants His children to live for Him and not for the satisfying of selfish pride, then James’ readers should follow that course.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 4:6.

What is the answer to conflict and worldliness among Christians?

How does grace respond to various types of conflict and covetousness?

How do we get the grace to withstand the call of the world?

Christians live in a world filled with people who focus on themselves and their cravings instead of on God and His purposes. Consequently, people battle one another (and God) to get what they want. Christians also can act in worldly ways. They can replace seeking “first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Matt. 6:33) with an attitude of “me first.” But despite our worldly hearts and the resulting conflicts, God is gracious.

Proverbs 3:34, quoted here by James, reminds us that God opposes the proud, the people who pursue their own pleasures. But God gives grace to those who humble themselves, those who put God’s desires above their own. He gives grace to believers so they can stand against the onslaughts of the flesh, the Devil, and the world.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How have you been adulterous spiritually in your life? How does a focus on the world instead of God keep us from getting along with one another?

Who is someone in your life with whom you are having conflict or an uneasy relationship? How can God’s grace help with that relationship?

How does God’s grace help us when we are proud?

PRAY

Ask God to give grace upon grace for the conflicts that arise in your life.

COMMENTARY

JAMES 4:1-6

4:1. Evidently, the peace and peacemakers James wrote about in 3:17-18 were in short supply among these Christians. He pointedly asked: From what source did their wars and the fights arise? The word wars refers to chronic military campaigns, while fights indicates separate battles in those campaigns. In the context of conflict among believers, the words refer to disputes and quarrels; some were expressions of ongoing hostility while others were temporary flare-ups.

We get our word hedonism from the Greek term for “cravings.” It conveys intense desire for what a person does not have. The term “war” has the sense of ongoing military action in which sensuality arrays its forces and moves to the attack in believers’ bodies.

4:2a. These believers kept on desiring and went on failing to get what they desired. The Greek term rendered “desire” means “lust after” or “covet.” It is different from the word for “cravings” in verse 1, but it also has the idea of focused yearning for what a person does not have.

James used strong language in an attempt to drive home the seriousness of these Christians’ behavior. When he charged, “you murder,” he probably had in mind Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:21-22, where the Lord taught that hatred and contempt are spiritually tantamount to murder. James was not describing petty differences but substantial and chronic conflict among believers. The sense is probably that these Christians wanted what others had, could not get what they wanted, and continued their hostile attempts to obtain their desires.

The Tenth Commandment prohibits coveting (see Ex. 20:17), but Christians were shattering it. The word “covet” conveys the sense of jealousy, spite, and envy—a white-hot zeal to have what someone else has. These believers’ attempts to get what they wanted were being frustrated, so they continued to fight and war (see v. 1).

4:2b-3. These believers did not receive because they did not ask in prayer. James did not suggest that God would give them what they coveted and quarreled over. He well may have meant his readers did not receive fulfillment and satisfaction because they had wrong motives and methods. Their greedy infighting left them empty and frustrated.

When these Christians petitioned God, they still did not get what they wanted because their desires were wrong, were not in line with God’s will. The word “wrongly” can point to evil motives. Believers selfishly asked God to fulfill their desires for pleasure. “Spend” has the idea of squandering resources, of wasting them or consuming them by extravagance. The phrase “desires for pleasure” translates the Greek word for self-gratification that James used in verse 1 (“cravings”). God’s answer to selfish, self-serving prayers is a resounding “No!”

4:4. Here “adulteresses” has a spiritual reference, describing one who is unfaithful to God. It probably reflects the Old Testament background of Israel’s committing adultery by idolatry. The term “world” indicates the sphere that is separated from God and dominated by evil. “Friendship with the world”—adopting its values and methods—means setting oneself in opposition to God. The word for “hostility” has the idea of separation. Whoever is disposed or willing to be the world’s friend becomes God’s enemy. Whoever chooses to live in the sphere ruled by evil thereby makes himself or herself God’s enemy.

4:5. Precisely what Scripture James had in mind here is difficult to determine. One suggestion is that he had in mind a verse such as Genesis 6:3, Exodus 20:5, or Exodus 34:14; but he restated it in his words. The phrase “without reason” means “to no purpose.” We might paraphrase the question: “Do you suppose the Scripture does not mean what it states?” God’s Spirit begins to reside in believers at conversion, and His Spirit continues to yearn jealously for their loyalty. With love He intensely pursues their loyalty. The Spirit works in accordance with God the Father’s insistence on having no rivals in their hearts. Thus the Spirit seeks to guide us toward being God’s friends and away from being friends of the world.

4:6. We do not have to continue in a state of bitter, selfish conflict. In contrast to destructive infighting, greater “grace” is available to overcome hostility and restore relationships. The term grace has the sense of God’s free gift and here refers to the necessary power to end chronic conflict with others, renew loyalty to Christ, and relate in love. James quoted Proverbs 3:34 to remind us of the peril of pride and the need for humility: God goes on setting Himself in opposition to the haughty and arrogant, but He continually extends His favor to people who are conscious of their need for His resources.

4:7. Ten urgent imperatives appear in verses 7-10. This extensive call for immediate, remedial action shows the seriousness of the situation being addressed. The first command is submit to God. By deliberate choice, these Christians

were to align themselves under God's leadership and be obedient to His directives. In their renewed obedience to God, they were to set themselves in opposition to the Devil. Because of God's presence and power with them, the Devil would flee from them. Evil would be vanquished from the battlefield.

4:8. In rapid-fire succession James gave three additional imperatives. He urged believers to draw near to God for the purpose of offering Him reverence and worship. To do so would strengthen or repair their personal relationship with Him.

4:9. James piled up terms to stress the sincere repentance believers should demonstrate because of their sins. They should be so distressed that they are moved to lament with tears. Their frivolous laughter should become lamenting; and their shallow, worldly joy should be changed to dejection. Only deep, genuine repentance would lead to the forgiveness they needed to remedy their situation.

4:10. James repeated the emphasis he had made in verses 6-7. He called on these readers to confess to God their sins, weaknesses, and inadequacies. They were to admit their need for His grace and be open to receive it. As a result of this change in attitude, God would lift conflict and divided loyalty from them. He would enhance their relationship with Him, and they would have moral and spiritual power necessary for Christian living. God's exaltation would be the polar opposite of the worldly prestige, honor, and recognition for which they fought one another.

READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

James 4:6-10