

James 26-09-02a

Good evening, it is Wednesday night at Grace and Truth Bible Church. This is the 2nd of September, 2026. We're in the Gospel of James, the Epistle of Jacob.

And we are starting tonight, Chapter 4. Chapter 4 of James. Bless God's blessing on our time of fellowship and study of the word. And then we'll begin.

Father, we cast ourselves on your grace and your mercy, knowing with confidence that we do not stand on our own merit, but on that which we enjoy because of the Lord Jesus, our Savior, your Son, who, in a perfect accomplishment of your will, came and lived a life of sinless perfection and of exemplary obedience, died on the cross to achieve our redemption and reconciliation, propitiation for our sins, atonement and enablement for us to enter into relationship with you through him. We're grateful for the tremendous privileges we enjoy as a result. We can come boldly before your throne to ask for grace to help in time of need, to intercede on behalf of one another, to confess our sins and receive the cleansing grace that comes through your word and your spirit, all through the atoning blood of the Lord Jesus.

We thank you for the opportunity to look at this portion of your word tonight. We pray that God, the Holy Spirit, will help us to understand it and figure out how it should affect the way we think and speak and act. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. This is just a gangbusters chapter. I'm so excited to have arrived here, having looked at Chapter 1 with its appeal for wisdom in times of struggle and testing, the exhortations that we found in Chapter 2 and in Chapter 3 with regard to putting our faith into practice.

And we come now to Chapter 4. Let's read the first portion of it together. Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain.

You fight and war, yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask amiss that you may spend it on your pleasures. Adulterers and adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, The spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously, but he gives more grace. Therefore he says, God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. This is confusing if you look at it in any great detail.

We begin at verse 1. Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? This is best understood by following it in the Greek. I'll apologize in advance. I try not to inflict any more Greek on you than I have to.

But it's so much easier to understand this looking at the Greek word order. So if I go to my Nestle Allen 27 Greek text, it says where fights and where wars. Actually, it says where wars and where fights.

That's the first four words. Pothin means where. Polemoi, we get the word polemics from this.

And these are verbal wars in the metaphorical sense. And where machai, M-A-C-H-A-I. And this is fights, physical fights, but it comes to mean verbal fights.

I heard this couple fighting last night. We don't generally think of fisticuffs. We think they were yelling at each other, arguing in a heated fashion.

And this is what it's talking about. There's not literally armies and battle lines and so on in the physical sense. Among you, this is, of course, the plural, the second person plural.

And all of the yous that you are going to see in these next few verses are the second person plural. Y'all, we say. So where do wars and fights come from among you all? Who is you all? This is such an important concept to grasp.

It is the key to understanding the book of Romans. Paul initializes and inaugurates that letter by telling us who it's addressed to. And it is to the sanctified ones in Rome.

So everything that follows is not a salvation tract. The Roman road has been a wonderful tool to share the gospel with people. But that was not Paul's purpose.

He is not trying to evangelize the saints in Rome. He is trying to get them to understand some wonderful theological truths. In the same way, when James here says, there are wars and fights in your midst.

He is talking to the synagogue, previously mentioned. This is the group. This is an early letter before it is referred to as an ecclesia, a gathering of the called.

Those who are called out from the world to be separate. That becomes the word church. But here, he says, this is your brothers and sisters in Christ.

This is the group. And at this point, they are still meeting at the synagogue. Or something equivalent to it.

So, there are wars and fights among you. Where do they come from? Then he says, Ek and Tuthon. It is just two words.

So, where are wars and where are fights among you? Not this. This Greek is so tight and beautiful. Where are wars and where are fights among you? Not this.

From your hedonism. Ek, out from. Hedonon.

Hedonon. Actually, there is an omicron and an omega there. Hedonon.

This is where we get the word hedonist or hedonism. Self-gratification. You want pleasure.

You want to feel good. And in the pursuit of feeling good, you are embattled with your fellow believers. The wars and fights among you, do they not come from your selfish desire for pleasure? Your hedonism.

Your stratuomenon. The first part of that, that stratuo portion, that is where we get strategy. This is your plotting, your scheming, your endeavor to get over on someone.

So, it is translated here, your desire for pleasure, that war in the members of you. The meleysen humon. Now remember, this is you plural.

So, we tend to read this and think, well, it is my old sin nature, and my hands want to do some things, my feet want to do some things, my mouth wants to talk a certain way, my ears want to hear certain things, and there is a war in my members, my physical composition. No. This is the members of the group.

Makes a lot more sense, doesn't it? There are divergent and contrasting and conflicting desires. Everybody is out for himself in the group. And these desires, I want my way.

There have been brick and mortar churches where the church split because they couldn't agree on the color of the upholstery of the pews or the paint on the walls or the kind of seating or who's going to play what instrument or who's in the choir and who's out and other minor things. And the group, members within the group, got so committed to it's my way or the highway that the group fell apart. Lost focus on what should draw them together.

If we draw near to the Lord together, we will inevitably draw closer to each other. This is the opposite. I see things a certain way and it's just got to be this way.

This can be a group of two. This can be within a marriage. It can be within a family.

It can be in the nuclear family where you've got parents and children before or after they grow up. It can be in the larger family where you've got siblings that maybe have scattered and have families of their own. But when it comes to something that is of joint concern, I see it my way.

I did it my way. Frank Sinatra is famous for that song, but it was actually written by another guy whose name momentarily slips my mind. It's not important.

What is important is to watch out for when we get so convinced that we're right and so invested in our rightness that it comes at the expense of our relationship with others. Remember when Paul talks about this in Corinth and he says, I hear you're taking each other to court and before unbelievers at that, do you not know you're going to judge angels? It would be better for you to be

wronged. Let the recalcitrant, immature believer have their way at your expense and let God do the compensation.

You will get a greater blessing from God in these non-consequence conflicts. Now, where there's a matter of morality or imminent danger or, you know, there are some things where there's a hill you have to die on. But in other cases where it's a triviality, well, where are we going to have Thanksgiving this year? Well, it was there last year and they, well, we had this and now I want that.

And well, if it's not Turkey, I'm not coming in and so on. Trivialities yield. Be flexible about non-essentials.

We are always inflexible about essentials. We are flexible about non-essentials. The trick is sorting those.

What will I take a stand on and never yield? There are certain essentials that we will not compromise. We will not give in, give out, give up. There are other things that are really not important.

Certainly not important enough to rupture relationship. Where do these wars and fights? This word for fights comes from the physical punching matches and was adopted by the Greeks in the same way that we use the word in English. It's not often an actual case of fisticuffs, but it can bruise and damage and wound and separate people just as much.

Has James not just given us the better part of a chapter talking about the tongue and how important it is to bridle it? And this word when it's not used for actual physical conflict is used for verbal conflict. These wars and fights are heated arguments that reflect divisions and differences in points of view in the group, in your members. These are the people in the group adopting different... We don't often have our right hand start punching us in the ear because there's a war in our physical members of our individual body.

But it's very common in a group of believers attached by whatever means for worship, family, work, ministry, any number of things that might bring us into contact. So if there is conflict, if there is disharmony and disunity, remember how much Paul talked about this back in 1 Corinthians? 3.3 of 1 Corinthians, for where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? Anybody in the world can act this way. 4.1 says, I'm of Paul, another I'm of Apollos, are you not carnal? Notice they are claiming a spiritual teacher as their authority and as their leader.

And Paul says, that's not spiritual. You're talking about spiritual things, but you're doing it out of fleshly desire and carnality. Who then is Paul? Who is Apollos? Just ministers through whom he believed, as the Lord gave to each one.

I planted, Apollos watered, God gave the increase. Neither is he who plants anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. James, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive the greater judgment.

Here, this is selfishness. This is pride. It is arrogance, self-centeredness, self-gratification.

I'll be happy if I get my way. Doesn't matter what the effect is on others. So, verse two, you lust, this is epithumeo, that thumos is the passion part of it.

And you are passionate upon, epi. Epi is upon or about a thing. And you've got this issue and you've got a strong desire.

As with some other things, such as faith, pistio, the determination of whether this faith is a good thing or a bad thing depends on what you place your faith in, what you place your confidence in. In the same way, there are words like zelao, which we're going to see upcoming, or epithumeo, you can have a godly desire, a godly zeal, or you can have one that is absolutely pointed in the wrong direction. It isn't having zeal per se, it's what it's aimed at.

And so here, it says, you lust, you desire, and you do not have. You are frustrated because there's something you want and you're not getting it. This goes back to the preceding verse.

I want things to go this way in the group. I want traditional hymns. Well, this other person wants worship songs.

Well, I want a choir. Well, I don't want a choir. I want modern music.

Well, I want traditional music. I want this hymn book. I want that hymn book.

I want to use this version of the scripture. I want to use that one. I want the children's program to work like this.

Well, we want it to work like that. And wanting it, and it becomes an investment. There's no, well, let's try it that way and maybe we can come back after we've tried it and see if we like it that way.

How does it work out? Find a way to work within the parameters that someone else is suggesting or find a compromise. Churches have handled this all different ways in terms of traditional or modern services. Sometimes they have two services.

I kind of think that's a division, but if that's the way you need to do it to keep the peace, so be it. But how much better to maybe alternate? Some people like praise songs. Some people like traditional hymns.

Well, do a little of each. The traditionalists can sit through a praise song. The praise people need to hear the wonderful inspired lyrics of the old traditional hymns.

And remember the rock from which they were hewn and the pit from which they were digged and the tradition of godly inspired hymnal pieces that are the bedrock of the faith, that encapsulate and distill wonderful biblical truths, which is harder to do in praise and worship music. I'm not saying it can't be done, but try left foot, right foot for a while. Find some way to be harmonious and let everyone kind of meet in the middle.

Patience is part of the fruit of the spirit. Long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, humility. Maybe there are people who are reached by this music.

Just because it doesn't reach me or help me doesn't mean that it doesn't help someone else. This is true of a lot of things. Teaching styles, teaching content.

There are some people who, if the food is too strong, they'll spit it up or spit it out. Some people need to start with something that's a little bit less intense. Milk and not solid food, as Paul puts it in Hebrews.

So we have to be watchful and look out for our fellow believers. If we happen to be the adult in the room, how much more responsible are we to keep the peace, to arrive at decisions that don't alienate and divide and create fights and wars? You can't let the least mature people run the show, but you can sometimes let them think they are. So, they come from these epithumos.

They come from these desires. So, you want and you do not have. Then it says, you murder and covet and cannot obtain.

I want you to pay attention to this. There are two verses in this first part of chapter 4 of James that are intensely difficult. This is the first.

Let's think about this for a minute. The context here that we have seen in the first verse in the first couple of chapters, 1 through 3, concentrates on sins of the tongue. Man bridles the tongue, brings his whole body into subjection.

And this idea that there is verbal conflict. These fights and wars are of a verbal nature because you want things to be a certain way. But if you come on down through this, you find that you ask and do not receive because you ask amiss.

So, this is faulty prayer life. You're a friend of the world in verse 4. You're skipping on down here. And we need to submit to God and resist the devil in verse 7. Draw near to God in verse 8. Confess our sins in verse 8. Don't be slap happy in verse 9. Be humble in verse 10.

Verse 11, do not speak evil of one another. Now, let me ask you. If people are killing each other in the church, is your first exhortation going to be verse 11? Has he said anywhere you really need to quit with the murder? You need to stop laying in wait and doing the Cain and Abel thing to each other? This murder thing really sticks out as an anomaly.

It doesn't match the context. And if people are murdering each other, that's one of the Ten Commandments. It's the second of the bad sins that are recorded in Genesis.

After Adam and Eve disobey and eat the fruit and are kicked out of the garden, the next big sin is Cain murdering his brother Abel with intense consequences. So, is James really saying here, you murder and covet and cannot obtain, you fight and war, but you do not have because you do not ask. You're murdering to get stuff.

If people are actually committing murder, do you think the reason God is not hearing their prayers and answering their requests is because they're not asking or because they're killing each other? The killing thing just will not lay down and conform to the rest of the context. It sticks out like a sore thumb. I believe that in the earliest days of the transmission of this letter, as was the case with so much of the New Testament, there is an original copy of the letter and there are two or more individuals, maybe just one, usually two or three.

They're sitting there with papyrus or with a piece of leather, whatever it is they're writing on. One guy is reading the letter and the others are making a faithful copy of what he reads. It's a lot easier to dictate and have someone take down what you say, speak slowly, write down what you hear and move through.

It's much more difficult to look at a text, go over and write, look at a text and go down and write. Scribes have done it both ways for centuries. Therefore, there are two different kinds of textual errors.

One is misreading, especially if a text is being copied because it's old and faded, wrinkled, crumbling. The ink has become indistinct. We've got to make a fresh copy of this before it becomes unreadable.

And sometimes when you're reading it, you don't quite make out the original word and you write down a wrong word. And so these are obvious because this word looks a lot like this word but it's a little bit different. The second kind are those words that are sound-alikes.

They sound almost identical and you tend to gravitate to the one that is most familiar, the one that you've heard more or what you think the guy said. You don't have a question because it seemed clear at the time. I think this is an error of the second kind.

I think this was a mishearing because there are two words that are nearly identical. The word for kill or murder is phonuo. P-H-O-N-E-U, long O. Phonuo is actually phonuo.

The first O is an omicron, phonuo. P-H-O-N-E-U-O. That means to kill or to murder.

The second word, which I think was originally what James wrote, is phonuo. P-H-T-H-O-N-E-O. Phonuo.

They sound different in that vocabulary form, but when you put them in the second person plural, you do this and you do that, they sound virtually identical. So, and phonuo means to envy. You are envious is what this should say.

And notice that there is a nice structural parallel here because James uses two words that are facets of the same activity. Wars and fights are two different ways of talking about conflict between the members of the body, right? These are two different attitudes. You envy and desire.

You envy and covet, and you can't acquire or obtain. You fight and war, you can't keep the peace. You envy and covet and cannot obtain.

Then he goes back to the first one, you fight and war. And these are the verbal forms of the nouns that we had in verse one, the very same two. So my strong belief is that there has been a mishearing of the word here because if they are actually murdering one another, this ought to be a completely different chapter, don't you think? People killing each other in the church, in the assembly? Whoa, don't you know what happened to Cain when he killed his brother Abel? And you know, this is satanic and you're taking the lives of people.

But the sound alike, you envy rather than you kill, is perfect in this context. So my suggestion, and what I have written in my Bible is, you envy and covet and cannot obtain. Notice envy is aimed at the person.

Here's jealousy of someone who seems to have advantageous circumstances. Covet is wanting what they've got. One is aimed at the person, the other is aimed at what they have.

And you can't acquire it. You see them, you're envious of them because they have this thing and you can't acquire that thing, that power, that standing, that whatever it is they've got that you feel like you don't have. Now this flows more smoothly and we're not suddenly in capital crime territory.

So you desire strongly. Epithumia is a strong desire. You've just got this overwhelming investment in getting something.

You envy, you covet, and you cannot obtain. You fight and war, yet you do not have because you're going about it the wrong way. You're fighting, you're warring because you want a certain outcome.

You want things to be a certain way. And you're never going to acquire. This word that's translated to obtain means to obtain or acquire.

You can't obtain or acquire it. You fight and war. He goes back and says, you know, verse one again.

You fight and war. That's not the way to get what you want. I am reminded one of the first and

only really wise things I ever heard Dr. Phil say the few times that I watched his show was couple counseling, husband and wife.

And the guy was very dissatisfied with his wife because he would come home after a hard day at work and he thought that dinner ought to be waiting on him. She ought to be coming in with the pipe and the paper and the house shoes and, you know, doting on him. And every day when he would come home and he didn't find those things, he would grouse and carp and criticize and talk about the state of the house.

And so Dr. Phil asked the guy, I said, so what you want is for your wife to be loving and generous and dote on you when you come home? And he says, yeah. And he said, but what you actually do is come home and criticize and carp and complain and grouse. How's that working for you? How do you see that creating in your wife a desire to please you and make you comfortable and dote on you and have things ready for you? How do you see that being a cause and effect? And when it's put that way, you think, well, yeah, Captain Obvious could point that out, but sometimes we don't see the obvious.

What we are doing is not the path to what we want. And James says, you want these things, but you're fighting and warring. How do you expect things to turn out in a way that is a blessing to people and a glory to God by this evil means? The reason you don't have them is because you're not going to God.

You're not asking God. You're not focused on God, because as soon as you come into His presence, you're going to remember what's really important is what He wants. Going before God in prayer is a wonderful path to objectivity, because we suddenly are self-conscious about our desires and our personal gratification.

The light of the glory of God exposes the weakness and the incongruity and the impropriety of our little petty desires and the squabbles that ensue. You do not have these things because you're not going to God and asking, and that implies a lot. So, what's the solution? You ask and do not receive.

You say, well, but I do ask. So, this is a separate case. You don't have these things because you don't ask.

And what this really means is, even when you do ask, you're not asking appropriately. You're not asking legitimately. If you do come to God and ask, you're praying selfishly.

I want the plan of Sam. I want things to be the way I want them to be. And even when I pray, this is what I'm doing.

So, you ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly. You can think about this. Anybody that's been married knows that there are ways to ask about a thing or ask for a thing that aren't

tremendously off-putting.

Anybody that's been married knows this. You can come in with a furrow in your brow and say, where's my fill-in-the-blank? Or you can say, how was your day? Is there a way I can help you so that we have fill-in-the-blank here for supper or whatever? There are ways to ask that are conducive to fellowship and to a positive response. And there are ways to ask that immediately get somebody's defenses up, get their back up, annoy them, grate on their nerves, and they don't want to say yes because of the approach.

You ask amiss. In this case, you ask amiss because you want to spend it. Spend is a great translation of this word in Greek.

Your privilege of coming to God and asking, you waste it. You spend it trying to get what you want instead of being interested in God's will and God's work and God's purpose and God's people in your midst. Love is sacrificial to self and beneficial to others.

This is the opposite. It is sacrificial to others and beneficial to self. And God is not going to honor that kind of prayer.

You ask amiss because you're self-interested. I want what I want. God, give me what I want.

Instead, Lord, lead me into what you want. Help me to accomplish your purpose. Help me be a blessing to your people.

Well, this is very convicting. It helps to get murder out of the picture and see that envy is what is at issue here. You envy the person and you covet what they have.

This lays down and is a wonderful, very applicable passage for us. We're going to pause here and take our break. When we come back, we will pick up at verse 4. Adulterers, are we back in the Ten Commandments again? We'll see it when we come back from the break.