

Study 5: James Chapter 4

Introduction

In-fighting was occurring within the local congregations, and the brethren had stopped looking to God for their strength. Instead they were self-centred and were making cutting remarks and evil slanderous statements at one another. Whilst they claimed to be christians, their behaviour did not reflect Jesus. They were double-minded and unstable. It was time to put their faith into practice.

Body of the Study

Fighting Within

Spiritual Adulteresses

Righting the wrongs

Finding Fault with Others

Self Centred People

Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter 5 in preparation for next week

Imagine yourself as being a part of the situation that James describes “speaking evil of one another” “judging others” and “coveting and lusting after what others have”. You know that is not what God wants. What would you do about that situation – how would YOU change, so that THE SITUATION changed?

How does knowing that our life is a mist affect how we view the future, and what do we (or should we) do about it?

Notes for study 5: James Chapter 4

Introduction

In-fighting was occurring within the local congregations, and the brethren had stopped looking to God for their strength. Instead they were self-centred and were making cutting remarks and evil slanderous statements at one another. Whilst they claimed to be Christians, their behaviour did not reflect Jesus. They were double-minded and unstable.

Fighting Within

In the previous verses, James discussed the peace that comes from wisdom that is pure and from God, and is sown by peacemakers. However that is in contrast to what was happening in the local congregations. He does not (primarily) have in mind the problems that are happening in the wider world, and specifically asks “...*What causes fights and quarrels among you?...*” (4:1 NIV). The KJV/NKJV is a little harder and uses the word “wars”. James also gives us the answer to the question – in the form of a rhetorical question “...*Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?...*” (4:1 NIV) to which the answer must be in the affirmative “yes”. The NKJV is a little more specific about the problem “...*they come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members...*” (4:1 NKJV).

James is describing what is going on within the local congregations. There was arguing and bickering about some issues (although he doesn't tell us what the issues are). We can look around congregations from our own experience and imagine the types of things that might have been going on. Roper¹ describes some of these situations for us:

Often battles for the truth, but sometimes battles with less worthy motivations; such as the You-defeated-my-pet-project War, the They-won't-let-me-teach War, the They-fired-my-favourite-preacher War. Wars between nations are tragic, but nothing is more tragic than a religious “civil war” with brother arrayed against brother.

The problem began with *lust*, which is not wrong in and of itself (1:15), but if it is not constrained it will lead to sin and death. “...*You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight...*” (4:2 NIV). They were looking around at the world and all of the things that go with it (possessions, and worldly ways), and wanting to be like those around them. They did not have their minds on spiritual things, but rather on the physical things. Strongly desiring to have and coveting after these things resulted in quarrelling and fighting. They were never going to get what they were after in the first place, because they had the wrong motives. “...*You do not have, because you do not ask God...*” (4:2 NIV). But it didn't stop there. Even when they did ask, they still didn't get what they wanted. “...*When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures...*” (4:3 NIV).

This wasn't a problem in the way they asked, but rather in their motivation for asking in the first place. It's like a young boy who comes to his grandfather and asks if he can play with his old cricket bat. He asked very nicely and very sweetly. The grandfather thought that he wanted to practice with it under the tree with his friends from next door, and asked the child if that was what he wanted to do. “No,” said the child “Jack next door stole my marbles and I want the bat so I can go and beat his brains out”. There was just no way that the child was ever going to get hold of that cricket bat! It wasn't a problem in how he asked – the problem was in his motivation! God sees the true motivation in us – He knows our thoughts – and why we are asking. It comes back again to the double-minded man (1:7-8) who on the one hand says that he is committed to God, but on the other hand denies Him by his actions.

¹ Roper, p. 80

Spiritual Adulteresses

James hits at the root of the problem (worldliness instead of Godliness), and describes those people as “...*Adulterers and adulteresses!*...” (4:4 NKJV). However, in the Majority Text only the feminine form is present “adulteresses”. The translators of the Received Text (KJV / NKJV) has added the masculine form. The feminine form is consistent with the usage in scripture of the church being the bride of Christ (Eph 5:22-32; Rev 21:2). The Christians who had committed themselves to the Lord were now selling themselves to the world by wanting to take on worldly things. God sees this as spiritual adultery by those who are His bride “...*You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God...*” (4:4 NIV).

The idea of *friendship* is not what we would normally think of as *being friendly with our neighbours*. James has in mind something that is much deeper. He has already set the context by describing their lust and covetousness and their desires for pleasures. The problem is not our friendship with these people, but when we have a desire to be like them (when we lust after and covet such things). This cannot co-exist with our relationship with God. We left behind the old man when we became Christians, and we cannot look back and want to go back there and still remain in our relationship with God! When we do this we “...*make ourselves an enemy of God...*” (4:4). No-one does it to us, *we choose* to be this way, and *make ourselves* God's enemy.

How God reacts to and is hurt by our behaviour is shown by the next verse “...*Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?*...” (4:5 NIV). God is a jealous God – He wants our 100% devotion to Him and Him alone. He is hurt by any desire that we have to turn away from Him and go back to the worldly desires and behaviour. Specifically, the Holy Spirit (which is God living in us) is grieved, and we are told not to grieve the Spirit (Eph 4:30). This is a plain passage teaching that the person of the Holy Spirit lives within us (although this is denied by many and they go at length to try to explain it away). It is not God dwelling in us only as much as His word lives in us, but the person of the Holy Spirit, who interacts with our spirit (as Paul discusses in Romans 8).

James introduces a slight problem here when he purports to quote scripture “...*do you think the scripture says in vain, “the Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously”?*...” (4:5 NKJV). The problem is that although the point that James makes is true, there is no such scripture from which to make a direct quote. The rendering of the NIV is probably more accurate.

Although we err against God, He does not reject us, and even though we may stray, “...*He gives more grace. Therefore He says: “God resist the proud, But gives grace to the humble”...*” (4:6 NKJV). God does not cover our sins if we turn against Him and do not repent. What James is saying is that even though we might sometimes lust and covet after worldly things, if our hearts are truly wanting to serve God, that His grace is bigger than our sin, and He will forgive us. But we need to be humble about it. We need to repent, and ask Him to forgive us. But if we have the wrong motives, *we ought not to think that we will receive anything from the Lord* (1:7).

Righting the wrongs

James provides a list of short instructions as to what we need to do to get these things right in our lives:

Submit yourselves, then, to God. (4:7)

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (4:7)

Come near to God and he will come near to you. (4:8)

Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. (4:8)

Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. (4:9)

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. (4:10)

It requires our submission to God. When we are truly submissive to Him, then we will find no place for the things of the world that distract us away from Him. James has no illusions as to the source of the problem. It comes from Satan. If we resist Satan, then he will flee from us. Rather

than embracing Satan, we need to embrace God. Coming back to God requires us to purify ourselves, and to stop being double-minded. Rather than finding joy in the things of the world, we need to recognise the sinful practice and grieve over them, repenting of our sins.

Finding Fault with Others

James comes down to the point, and starts to make practical application into the local church “...*Do not speak evil of one another, brethren...*” (4:11 NKJV). So, we can (again) see what’s been happening in the church(es). There was separation between the rich and poor (2:4), bitterness and envy (3:14), and internal fighting (4:1). Rather than thinking good things about the brethren, some were looking to find fault, and were then spreading that around the congregation.

In effect, speaking evil about someone else makes you a judge of that person – you have already judged them to be evil, although you might not know the full facts and circumstances of their situation. Rather than *doing* what God says, we are playing at being God by judging them. “...*He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge...*” (4:11 NKJV).

We need to remember that we will be judged by the Lord and what He taught (Jn 12:48), and that we need to conform ourselves to Him. The problem James addresses is that some of the brethren wanted the others to conform themselves to their own standard. “...*There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and destroy. Who are you to judge another?...*” (4:12 NKJV).

Self Centred People

James looks at the problem from another perspective – the brethren were being self-centred and excluding God from the equation. Instead of relying on God they were relying on themselves. They had forgotten that God is in control of the world, and had not put Him in control of their lives. “...*Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes...*” (4:13-14 NIV). Business travel was common (Lydia, Aquila & Priscilla for example), and some of these business people were planning what they might do to make money – travel to a different city – stay there for a year – work at a business – and make lots of money! God was not even a consideration in the equation.

In contrast, we need to realise that our life is short. We are only on this earth for a short period, and just like the vapour of smoke that appears for a short while, our lives can be puffed out in no time. The only hope that we have is to rely on God. “...*Instead you ought to say, "if the Lord wills, we shall do this or that"...*” (4:15 NKJV).

No Christian can live independently of God. For believers to leave God out of their plans is an arrogant assumption of self-sufficiency, a tacit declaration of independence from God. It also overlooks reality. Whether people recognize it or not, they "will live and do this or that" only "if it is the Lord's will." (NIVBC)

However, in contrast, some of these brethren were boasting and bragging about what they were and weren’t going to do. “...*As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil...*” (4:16 NIV). And it wasn’t just that they didn’t know any better. They knew full well what they ought to do, but had chosen not to do it “...*Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin...*” (4:17 NKJV). The specific context is about these people who knew they ought to include God in their plans, but had omitted to do it. But the same principle has a much wider application as we look at our lives, and the things that we know we ought to do.