

Introduction to James Chapter 4

Friendship With the World and the Grace That Humbles: Wars Within, Judgment of the Brother, and the Vapor of Tomorrow

Chapter 3 closed with the promise that the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace, the natural harvest of the wisdom that is from above. Chapter 4 opens by asking the question that promise makes unavoidable: from whence come wars and fightings among you? The peace that heavenly wisdom was said to produce is nowhere evident in the scattered congregations James addresses, and the chapter's first ten verses trace that absent peace to its true source — not circumstance, not other people, but the believer's own ungoverned desire, the earthly wisdom of 3:14–16 now shown in its full social and spiritual consequence.

The first section, verses 1 through 10, diagnoses the community's conflict as the fruit of lusts that war in your members: desire that goes unsatisfied, prayer that goes unanswered because it is never offered or is offered only to be spent upon further desire, and a friendship with the world that James names, without softening, as enmity with God. Yet the diagnosis is not the chapter's last word — but he giveth more grace turns the argument from indictment to invitation, and the ten staccato imperatives that follow (submit, resist, draw nigh, cleanse, purify, mourn, humble yourselves) trace the path from the proud self-sufficiency that provokes God's resistance to the humility that receives his grace.

The second section, verses 11 through 17, applies the same logic of presumption to two further scenes: the believer who speaks evil of a brother and thereby sets himself up as a judge over the law itself rather than a doer of it, and the merchant who plans a year of travel and profit as though his life were his own to schedule, forgetting that it is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. Both scenes are variations on the same sin — the arrogation to oneself of a certainty and an authority that belong to God alone — and the chapter closes with the aphorism that gathers the whole letter's ethical vision into a single sentence: to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.

The chapter's argument returns, at nearly every point, to categories the letter has already established: the lust that conceives sin in 1:14–15 now wars in the members and starts the community's conflicts; the double-minded man of 1:8 reappears in 4:8's purify your hearts, ye double minded; the earthly wisdom of 3:15 becomes the friendship with the world of 4:4; and the doers-not-hearers-only principle of 1:22 becomes the sin of knowing to do good and not doing it in 4:17. Chapter 4 is less a new topic than the letter's accumulated diagnoses converging on a single root — proud self-will — and a single remedy — humbling oneself in the sight of the Lord, who alone is able to lift up.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We come to James chapter 4 knowing that the wars and fightings among us, and within us, come from the lusts that war in our own members. We have asked amiss, seeking to consume your gifts upon our own desires, and we have too often sought the friendship of the world without reckoning that such friendship is enmity with you. Forgive us, Lord, for every proud self-sufficiency that has provoked your resistance rather than received your grace.

Teach us to submit ourselves to you, to resist the devil until he flees, to draw nigh to you trusting that you will draw nigh to us. Cleanse our hands, for we are sinners, and purify our hearts, for we are double minded. Let our laughter be turned to mourning where mourning is due, and humble us in your sight, that you might lift us up in your time and not our own.

And Lord, keep us from speaking evil of our brothers and sisters, and from judging what only you, the one lawgiver, are able to judge. Remind us that our life is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away, that we might say, if the Lord will, and never presume upon a single day you have not given us. And where we know to do good and do it not, convict us, for we know that to us it is sin.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

James 4:1–10

Wars and Fightings, Friendship With the World, and the Grace Given to the Humble

(1) From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?

(2) Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.

(3) Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

(4) Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?

whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.

(5) Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?

(6) But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.

(7) Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

(8) Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.

Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.

(9) Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.

(10) Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.

The Context

The question that opens the chapter, from whence come wars and fightings among you?, answers itself before the community can look elsewhere for the blame: come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? James locates the origin of communal conflict not in scarce resources or in the malice of others but inside the believer, in the same lust (hedone, pleasure or desire) that 1:14–15 already traced from conception to sin to death. Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain describes a spiraling frustration in which desire outruns its object and violence — whether the hyperbolic language of murderous envy or a literal echo of the social violence such envy could provoke — becomes desire's next resort when the object remains out of reach.

The diagnosis sharpens in the second half of verse 2 and in verse 3: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not, and ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts. The community has forgotten the very remedy 1:5 already offered — if any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God — and even when it does ask, the asking itself has been corrupted, aimed not at what God gives liberally but at fuel for the very lusts already driving the community's wars. Prayer here is not absent from the community's life; it has simply been enlisted in the service of the same self-will that produces the conflict it never resolves.

The blunt address of verse 4, ye adulterers and adulteresses, invokes the Old Testament's prophetic language of covenant unfaithfulness (Hosea 2–3; Ezekiel 16), in which Israel's pursuit of other loyalties is named as marital betrayal of the God to whom she is bound. Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God draws the starkest possible line: friendship with the world's values and God's favor are not two loyalties that can be balanced but two allegiances that are mutually exclusive, the same either-or Jesus names in Matthew 6:24's no man can serve two masters, and the same double-mindedness James has already diagnosed in 1:8.

Verse 5's do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy? is among the most debated sentences in the letter, since no single Old Testament verse matches it exactly; James is most likely summarizing the consistent scriptural witness to the human spirit's native tendency toward envy (compare Genesis 6:5; 8:21) rather than quoting a specific text. But the diagnosis of verse 5 is immediately overtaken by the larger grace of verse 6: but he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble, quoting Proverbs 3:34 (also cited in 1 Peter 5:5) as the hinge on which the whole section turns — the tendency to envy is real, but the grace available to meet it is greater still, available specifically to the humble rather than the proud.

The ten imperatives of verses 7–10 apply the grace of verse 6 in a tightly ordered sequence: submit yourselves therefore to God and resist the devil form an inclusio of allegiance, one act of surrender and one act of resistance; draw nigh to God answers with the promise he will draw nigh to you; cleanse your hands, ye sinners addresses the external, ritual dimension of repentance (compare Exodus 30:19–21) while purify your hearts, ye double minded addresses the internal dimension, returning explicitly to 1:8's dipsychos; be afflicted, and mourn, and weep summons the community to a grief that the world's friendship has made unfashionable, and humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up closes the section by restating the principle of verse 6 as a personal promise — the same reversal of proud and humble already sounded in 1:9–10's exaltation of the lowly and humbling of the rich.

Plain American English

What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And when you ask, you don't receive it because you ask with wrong motives, desiring only to satisfy your own desires. You adulterers! Don't you know that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: if you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God. Do you think the Scriptures have no meaning? They say that God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him. And he gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor.

Key Observations

"Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain... ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not": This signifies **The Wars Among the Community Are Traced Not to External Circumstance but to an Ungoverned, Unasked Desire That Has Forgotten the God to Whom It Might Have Been Brought.**

James refuses to let the community locate the cause of its conflict anywhere but in itself: the spiraling sequence of lust, frustration, and violence is presented as a closed loop that never once includes the step 1:5 already commended — asking God. The observation is diagnostic rather than merely condemnatory: the community's wars are not a mystery requiring external explanation but the entirely predictable fruit of desire that has never been submitted to the God who gives liberally, and the remedy the chapter will offer in verses 7–10 begins exactly where the community's own pattern has left a gap — with the asking, and the submission, it has omitted.

"know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God": This signifies Friendship With the World and Standing With God Are Named as Mutually Exclusive Allegiances Rather Than as Two Loyalties That Might Be Held in Careful Balance.

The verse forecloses a common strategy for managing the tension between faith and worldly ambition — the attempt to hold both as complementary rather than competing loyalties — by naming the relationship in the starkest possible terms: enmity, not mere distraction, and enemy, not mere rival affection. This is the same logic that named the double-minded man unstable in all his ways in 1:8, and it anticipates the chapter's turn to humility as the only posture from which friendship with God, rather than with the world, becomes possible; pride is simply what friendship with the world looks like from the inside.

"God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble": This signifies The Citation of Proverbs Turns the Section From Diagnosis to Invitation, Establishing Humility Rather Than Achievement as the Sole Condition on Which the Grace Already Promised in 1:5 Is Actually Received.

The quotation from Proverbs 3:34 functions as the chapter's theological pivot: everything before it in verses 1–5 is diagnosis, and everything after it in verses 7–10 is invitation, and the hinge between them is the recognition that God's resistance is reserved specifically for pride, while his grace flows freely to humility. This is not a bare behavioral formula but a restatement of the same generous God described in 1:5, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not — the grace was never withheld from the community; only its own pride had made that grace impossible to receive.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Trace Every Contemporary Conflict, Whether Within the Heart or Within the Community, Back to the Ungoverned Desire That Has Never Been Brought Honestly to God in Prayer: The ye have not, because ye ask not of verse 2 is a direct diagnostic tool for a contemporary believer or community caught in ongoing conflict: before assigning blame to circumstance or to another person, James calls for an honest inventory of the desire actually driving the conflict, and an honest reckoning with whether that desire has ever been submitted to God in prayer rather than pursued by force, manipulation, or grievance. The contemporary application is not that every desire is illegitimate, but that every desire pursued outside of submission to God becomes, sooner or later, a source of war.

2. Refuse Every Contemporary Arrangement That Treats Friendship With the World and Devotion to God as Compatible Loyalties Requiring Only Careful Balance Rather Than a Decisive Choice: The whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God resists the common contemporary instinct to manage the tension between worldly ambition and spiritual devotion as a matter of proportion — a little more of one, a little less of the other — rather than as the stark either-or James insists it actually is. The contemporary believer is called to examine which loyalty is actually functioning as the operative one when career, reputation, comfort, and belonging in the eyes of the world are weighed against obedience to God,

remembering that pride, not any particular worldly good in itself, is the disposition James identifies as the real enemy.

How This Relates to Today

The diagnosis of wars and fightings among you speaks with unusual precision to a contemporary church that so often locates the cause of its internal conflicts in personality differences, communication styles, or organizational dysfunction, without ever asking James's more searching question: what unmet, unsubmitted desire for status, control, recognition, or security is actually driving this conflict? The contemporary application is uncomfortable precisely because it refuses the easier external explanations and insists that the community look first at its own lusts that war in your members.

The ten imperatives of verses 7–10 also offer a contemporary community accustomed to therapeutic language about conflict resolution a starker and more spiritually direct alternative: not merely better communication but submission to God, resistance of the devil, cleansed hands, and a purified, undivided heart. The contemporary church that has reduced repentance to an occasional private feeling rather than the deliberate, active posture of humbling yourselves in the sight of the Lord that James commands has not yet reckoned with how much of this section is imperative rather than merely descriptive.

Key Lesson: **The opening section traces the community's wars and fightings to the lusts that war within its own members, exposes even its prayer as corrupted by the same self-seeking desire, and names friendship with the world as flat enmity with God, before the citation of Proverbs turns the argument from diagnosis to invitation — God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble — and the ten imperatives that follow trace the path of submission, resistance, cleansing, mourning, and humility by which the grace already promised in the letter's opening chapter is finally and actually received.**

James 4:11–17

Judging the Brother, Boasting of Tomorrow, and the Sin of Knowing to Do Good and Doing It Not

(11) Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law:

but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge.

(12) There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?

(13) Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain:

(14) Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life?

It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

(15) For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.

(16) But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil.

(17) Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.

The Context

Speak not evil one of another, brethren applies the tongue's danger from chapter 3 to a specific and evidently common failure within the assembly: speaking against a brother (katalalia, backbiting or slander). James's argument is more radical than a simple prohibition against unkind speech; he that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law reasons that the royal law of 2:8, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, is precisely what such speech violates, and that to violate the law while claiming its authority is, in effect, to sit in judgment over the law itself rather than to submit to it as a doer.

The logic of but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge is a precise application of the doers-not-hearers-only principle of 1:22: a person cannot simultaneously stand under the law as its doer and stand over the law as its judge, and the believer who speaks evil of a brother has, whether he recognizes it or not, stepped out of the first posture and into the second. Verse 12 names exactly what has been usurped: there is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another? The rhetorical question does not deny that wrongdoing should be named, but denies that any believer holds the authority to render the kind of final judgment on a brother that belongs to the one lawgiver alone.

The scene of verses 13–14 shifts from speech to planning: go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain pictures the confident itinerant merchant, mapping out travel, duration, and profit as though the future were simply his to schedule. James's rebuke does not condemn commerce or planning as such, but the presumption embedded in the plan's confident whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow — a presumption exposed by the wisdom tradition's verdict on human life: for what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away (compare Psalm 39:5; Job 7:7; Ecclesiastes 1:2).

Verse 15's for that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that, does not prescribe a magical verbal formula to be recited before every plan, but names the posture of submission already commanded in 4:7 — submit yourselves therefore to God — applied now to the ordinary business of planning a life. The contrast in verse 16, but now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil, uses boastings (alazoneiais, the same root behind the pride of life in 1 John 2:16) to name the sin precisely: not the making of plans, but the arrogant confidence that treats those plans as guaranteed rather than contingent on a will greater than one's own.

The chapter's closing aphorism, therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin, functions as a summary verdict over the entire chapter and, in some respects, over the whole letter: the wars and fightings of verses 1–10, the judging of the brother in verses 11–12, and the presumptuous boasting of verses 13–16 are all, at bottom, failures to do what was already known to be good — to submit, to love the neighbor, to hold plans loosely before God. The therefore ties the aphorism directly to the preceding boasting, but its generalized form (him that knoweth to do good) extends the indictment to every sin of omission, closing the chapter on the same note that opened the letter's ethical vision in 1:22: hearing and knowing the good is never sufficient without the doing of it.

Plain American English

Don't speak evil against each other, dear brothers and sisters. If you criticize and judge each other, then you are criticizing and judging God's law. But your job is to obey the law, not to judge whether it applies to you. God alone, who gave the law, is the Judge. He alone has the power to save or to destroy. So what right do you have to judge your neighbor? Look here, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, stay there a year, do business, and make a profit.' How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog — it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, 'If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.' Otherwise you are boasting about your own plans, and all such boasting is evil. Remember, it is sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it.

Key Observations

"He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law": This signifies **Slander of a Brother Is Not Merely a Relational Offense but an Implicit Usurpation of the Lawgiver's Own Seat, Since It Sets the Speaker Above Rather Than Under the Law That Commands Love.**

James's argument moves in a direction most readers would not anticipate: he does not simply say that speaking evil of a brother breaks the law, but that it judges the law, treating it as something to be overruled rather than obeyed. The believer who speaks evil of a brother has, in that moment, quietly reclassified the royal law of loving one's neighbor as optional, and has claimed for himself the authority to decide when it applies — an authority that belongs, as verse 12 will make explicit, to the one lawgiver alone.

"For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away": This signifies **The Wisdom Tradition's Verdict on the Brevity of Life Is the Ground for a Humble, Contingent Confidence About the Future Rather Than the Presumptuous Certainty of the Confident Planner.**

The vapor image does not counsel against planning altogether — James's rebuke falls on the presumption embedded in the plan, not on the plan itself — but it relativizes every human scheme by the plain fact that the one making it does not control the number of his days. The image draws the whole discussion of judging the brother and boasting of tomorrow into a single

frame: both sins share the same root, an inflated confidence in one's own authority and permanence that the vapor of life quietly but decisively contradicts.

"to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin": This signifies **The Chapter's Closing Aphorism Names Sins of Omission as Genuine Sin, Gathering the Wars, the Judging, and the Boasting of the Whole Chapter Into a Single Verdict on the Failure to Do the Good Already Known.**

The aphorism's generalized form reaches beyond the immediate context of boasting merchants to indict every known good left undone, closing the chapter with the same insistence that opened the letter's ethical vision in 1:22, be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only. Sin, on this reckoning, is not limited to active transgression; the failure to act on what one already knows to be good is itself named sin, without qualification, making this one of the most searching single sentences in the entire letter.

What This Means for Us Today

1. Recognize That Every Habit of Criticizing and Judging a Brother or Sister Quietly Substitutes the Speaker's Own Authority for the Law's, and Return Instead to the Posture of a Doer Rather Than a Judge:

The contemporary temptation to speak evil of another believer — in gossip, in online criticism, in the casual judgments exchanged within a community — is rarely experienced as usurping the lawgiver's seat, yet James insists that is precisely what it does. The contemporary believer is called to notice the subtle shift from doing the law's command to love, to judging whether a particular brother deserves that love, and to return deliberately to the first posture, trusting the one lawgiver to render the judgments that do not belong to any believer to render.

2. Hold Every Plan for Tomorrow With the Humble Contingency of If the Lord Will, Refusing the Boastful Confidence That Treats a Vapor-Length Life as Though It Were Fully Within Human Control:

The if the Lord will of verse 15 is a direct and practical corrective to a contemporary culture of confident long-range planning — career trajectories, retirement projections, five-year goals — pursued with little functional acknowledgment that the planner's life is even a vapour. The contemporary believer is not called to abandon planning but to hold every plan with an open hand, remembering that the boasting James calls evil is not ambition itself but the arrogant certainty that forgets whose will actually governs the outcome.

How This Relates to Today

The warning against judging a brother speaks with particular force to a contemporary culture of public, instantaneous, and often permanent criticism, in which believers can slip into the posture of judge over a fellow believer's conduct, doctrine, or character with a speed and a reach James's original readers could not have imagined. The contemporary community of faith is called to remember that public criticism of a brother, however factually accurate, can still function as the very usurpation of the lawgiver's seat that James condemns if it proceeds from judgment rather than love.

The vapor of life and the therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin also speak to a contemporary tendency to defer good intentions indefinitely — the good deed postponed until a more convenient season, the reconciliation delayed until circumstances improve, the act of generosity deferred until resources feel more secure — on the unstated assumption that tomorrow is reliably available for the doing. James's aphorism removes that assumption entirely, making the good deed known but undone a sin in the present moment, not merely a plan indefinitely postponed.

Key Lesson: **The closing section applies the letter's concern for the tongue and for the doing of the word to two further scenes of presumption — the believer who speaks evil of a brother and thereby judges the law rather than doing it, and the merchant who plans a year of travel and profit as though his vapor-length life were his own to schedule — and closes with the aphorism that gathers the whole chapter, and much of the letter, into a single verdict: to know the good and leave it undone is itself sin, so that the remedy for wars, for judgment of the brother, and for presumptuous boasting is the same humble submission to the one lawgiver commended from the chapter's opening verses.**

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We close James chapter 4 having been shown the wars and fightings that come from our own unasked, unsubmitted desires, and the friendship with the world that we know to be enmity with you. Thank you that you giveth more grace, and that though you resist the proud, you give grace to the humble. Let us submit ourselves to you, resist the devil, and draw nigh to you, trusting that you will draw nigh to us.

Cleanse our hands, for we are sinners, and purify our hearts, for we have too often been double minded. Let us be afflicted, and mourn, and weep where our sin requires it, and humble ourselves in your sight, that you, and not we ourselves, might lift us up in your time.

And Lord, keep us from speaking evil of our brothers and sisters, remembering that there is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy, and that we are not that lawgiver. Remind us daily that our life is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away, that we might say, if the Lord will, in all our planning, and never rejoice in boastings that forget whose will truly governs our days. And where we know to do good and do it not, let us not call it a small thing, for you have called it sin.

In Jesus' name — in the name of the One who humbled himself and was highly exalted, who submitted himself perfectly to your will even unto death, and in whom alone the proud are brought low and the humble are lifted up — Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
Glory to God Alone