

Letter of St. James . . . Catholic Scripture Study

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you (James 4:7).

Week # 4 – Sources of Discord (4:1-12)

I. REVIEW

Last week (Chapter 3:3-18), St. James drew our attention to the contrast between **Christian** (true or godly) **wisdom** and **worldly** (false or earthly) **wisdom**.

Which do we want to do? Obey God and submit to his will, or follow our own desires? We cannot do both.

- The fruit of Christian wisdom is peace and holiness.
- The fruit of worldly wisdom is discord and strife.

One often finds discord and strife among Christians and that makes it difficult for them to live together in harmony. Saint James severely reproaches this sort of behavior, pointing out that it originates in greed in all its various forms.

Worldly wisdom springs from the devil. It turns our focus inward so that decisions spring from and are fueled by our selfish desires.

- It seeks to make us like God so that we can determine right from wrong independently of God.

It's the choice placed before Adam and Eve in the garden: the choice that led to the Fall, and it is a choice that continues to lead to disorder, jealousy, lies and "vile practices" in our lives today.

II. OVERVIEW

Chapter 4:1-12 contains warnings to various groups in the Christian community, condemning the graver kinds of moral deviation, which show that people are not practicing the faith they profess.

- Discord among Christians is the main problem addressed here.

One might expect godly wisdom to be the hallmark of the early Christian community; however, James suggests that things were otherwise.

The “wars” and “fighting” among them show they are not practicing what they believe. James examines the root of the problem and proposes a solution.

After the previous chapter, it might be easy to think it all comes down to a choice: to choosing which wisdom – godly or worldly, true or false - to apply in a particular situation.

But how many of us are able to do, always, what we want or think we should?

- The ultimate solution is found in a right relationship with God.

Read: James 4:1-12

III. CAUSES OF DIVISION (JAMES 4:1-3)

[1] What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members?

[2] You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask.

[3] You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

A. Wars among Men

“Wars” and **“fighting”** are an exaggerated reference to the quarrelling and discord found in the Christian communities to whom James is writing.

“Passions,” as elsewhere in the New Testament, includes concupiscence, hedonism, and pleasure-seeking.

Wars among men are a symptom of the spiritual war within a man, whose incessant drive for power, pleasure and possessions spreads envy and violence throughout the world.

- The root problem is that we are wounded people and our members yield too easily to the inclinations of our fallen nature (1 Pet 2:11).

Division and fighting result from **“passions at war in [our] members,”** that is, a conflict of competing desires, James says. They result from unfulfilled desires, greed, and envy.

- Those who don't get what they want, become angry – and fight and even kill to obtain what they want.

Previously, we learned about the internal “civil war” between flesh and spirit called *concupiscence* that reigns in each of us since the Fall.

As James makes clear here, if you cannot control what is going on inside of yourself, it will spill out and affect the community as well.

This does not mean that we have to suppress or repress our thoughts and feelings; on the contrary, we have to deal with them consciously, openly and truthfully in humility.

B. Prayer and Unfulfilled Desires

“You desire and do not have . . .”

What reason does James give for desires not being fulfilled?

“You do not have, because you do not ask . . . or ask wrongly”

James says.

Presumably they try to obtain things for themselves instead of depending on God to provide. Or if they do ask, they don't receive because they merely want things so they can spend them on their passions.

- There is a right way to ask in order to receive.
- Prayers go unanswered when we seek what will gratify our worldly desires rather than the help we need to live better Christian lives in accordance with God's will.
- Corrupt motives impede our petitions in the same way that doubt does.

Note: It is important to recognize that desire is not bad in itself. In fact, it is good to desire good things and to ask rightly for them.

IV. UNFAITHFULNESS REBUKED (JAMES 4:4-6)

[4] Unfaithful creatures! 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.

[5] Or do you suppose it is in vain that the scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us"?

[6] But he gives more grace; therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

A. Friendship with the World

James begins this section with the words **“Unfaithful creatures!”** In Greek this phrase literally means “Adulteresses!”

Question: In what way might **“friendship with the world”** be considered committing “adultery” against God?

- **“World”** here has the meaning of “enemy of God,” opposed to Christ and his followers.

The prophets used the epithet “Adulteresses” to describe the idol worshippers of Israel, whose infidelity to the covenant was considered spiritual adultery against God.

James charges some of his own community with idolatry because their love for created things exceeds their love for their Creator.

- **“Friendship with the world”** does not mean loving or appreciating creation.

It means an inordinate love of the world; aligning our desires with those of the world over and against God and the good he desires for us, and *finding fulfillment* there.

- This is spiritual adultery in the way that seeking to fulfill sexual desire in someone other than a spouse is physical adultery.

You can be friends with the world or with God but not both, because, as Jesus said;

“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 mammon (Mt 6:24).

Reflection:

To better understand “friendship with the world,” imagine trying to fulfill your needs for love and intimacy outside of your marriage.

- What would that do to your relationship with your spouse?
- How would it affect you personally?

Now apply that image to satisfying your needs outside of your covenant relationship with the Lord.

- What would that do to your prayer life?
- To your experience at Mass?
- To your ability to hear God’s voice and discern His will?
- To your sense of peace in times of trouble?

B. The Jealousy of God (James 4:5)

“He yearns jealously over the spirit . . . in us.”

This text can be translated in different ways, but the New Vulgate translates it as follows: ***“The Spirit who dwells in us jealously loves us.”***

How can God be jealous?

The jealousy described of God in James 4:5 is not the same as the jealousy James spoke against in chapter 3, which might be more aptly called envy.

Note: Envy wants what others have and seeks to take those things, even at the expense of harm of the other.

God’s jealousy is something else entirely. It is not a disorder; it is His intense pursuit of our good. God loves us with a limitless,

undying love and he longs for our undivided faithfulness, love, and devotion in return.

This is entirely appropriate in the context of his covenant relationship with us.

- We are in one sense his beloved children,
- In another sense his precious Bride.
- He created us and gave everything for us, even his life.
- His jealousy is a sign of the strength of his love for us.

C. More Grace

Being always faithful to God can be hard amid the attractions, trials and temptations of the world. But verse 6 gives us hope!

But he gives more grace; therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

God gives us the grace we need to avoid friendship with the world and remain faithful to him.

- Not only that, he gives us ***"more grace"*** as we need it!
- God opposes the proud, stripping them of pride and envy that could lead to their destruction, and gives grace to those who are humble.

This grace is "the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God" (CCC # 1996).

- It is a gift of **God's own life** in our souls, enabling us to live and act by his love.
- It is the **power** that makes it possible for us to act on the response we long to make to his love.

V. THE SOLUTION

[7] Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

[8] Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you men of double mind.

[9] Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to dejection.

[10] Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.

Instead of yielding to the warring passions within us, what does James tell us to do (vv 7-10)? He says:

- Submit yourself to God;
- Resist the devil and he will flee from you;
- Draw near to God and God will draw near to you;
- Cleanse your hands, purify your hearts;
- Be wretched, mourn and weep; Let laughter turn to mourning and joy to dejection;
- Humble yourselves before the Lord the Lord will exalt you.

A. Resist the Devil

The devil can tempt you but he cannot make you sin. Resist! And he will flee from you, James says. Jesus himself demonstrated how to do this when he faced the devil in the desert (see Mt 4).

Resistance is possible only because the power of God within us is greater than the power of the Evil One present in the world (1 John 4:4).

In resisting the devil we enter into spiritual warfare (Eph 6:11-18).

B. Spiritual Warfare – The Struggle against the Devil (Eph 6:11-18)

[11] Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

[12] For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

[13] Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

[14] Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness,

[15] and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace;

[16] besides all these, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one.

[17] And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

[18] Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.

C. Evil Spiritual Forces

In spiritual warfare the struggle is not primarily against human opponents (flesh and blood) or even our own human weakness, but against spiritual beings, demonic forces that exercise power in the world, namely, **principalities, powers, world rulers, evil spirits** in the heavens.

Although these terms can refer to human political authorities, here, Paul uses these words to refer to evil heavenly spiritual powers, which direct or influence human affairs.

Paul encourages the Ephesians to put on the whole armor of God including the weapon Jesus himself used, **“the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God”** (v.17).

The other weapons that provide a defense against the devil are truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, and salvation. Several tactics in our battle against the devil are also mentioned:

- Constant prayer in the Spirit,
- Keeping alert, and
- Perseverance.

The battle cannot be ignored, because, as the word of God says, **“Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour”** (1 Peter 5:8).

D. Draw Near to God

The next thing James says is to **“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”**

What are some ways we can draw near to God?

There are many things that we can do to help us draw closer to God, such as private prayer, reading Scripture, Eucharistic adoration, performing acts of charity in order to love Him in others, living chastely, and so on.

E. Cleanse Your Hands, Purify Your Heart

“Cleansing hands” should not be taken literally. The ritual purification required by Mosaic Law was a sign pointing to the need for internal cleansing. James is speaking of moral purity.

- Purification is demanded of everyone who approaches the all-holy God (Psalm 24:4-5; Isaiah 1:15-16).

Today we have the benefit of the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist to cleanse us from sin and double-mindedness (doubt, lack of faith).

F. Humility

The attitude of the heart that defeats pride, heads off division, and binds people together and to God is *humility*. James instructs us to **“be wretched and mourn and weep”** – in other words, to recognize that we are sinners and to turn to God in sorrow and repentance.

- Mourning and weeping are the external expression of sincere repentance.

“Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.”

It may seem that being humble and submitting to God would make one a “doormat,” that it leaves no room for any type of fulfillment. How does James counter this false idea?

One example of a passion people experience (and one that very often leads to discord) is a desire for self-pride. Submitting to God and humbling one's self may seem at first to be completely opposed to self-exaltation.

And indeed they are; but paradoxically they lead to that which was desired in the first place: a true exaltation by God and not by self, an exaltation that is true and lasting.

VI. WARNING AGAINST JUDGING ANOTHER

When James addressed sins of the tongue in chapter 3, he condemned them because of the great and uncontrollable harm they can cause.

- What different reason does he put forth in verses 11-12 below to refrain from speaking evil against or judging a brother?
- What is slander/calumny (and its fellow sin, detraction) and why is it wrong?

[11] Do not speak evil against one another, brethren. He that speaks evil against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

[12] There is one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you that you judge your neighbor?

A. Slander (or Calumny) and Detraction

“Do not speak evil against one another . . .”

The Greek word for **“speak evil against”** is translated in English as slander or calumny.

Believers are forbidden to malign (speak ill of) each other with either true (detraction) or false information (calumny). See CCC #2477.

CCC 2477: Respect for the reputation of persons forbids every attitude and word likely to cause them unjust injury.²⁷⁸ He becomes guilty:

- of **frash judgment** who, even tacitly, assumes as true, without sufficient foundation, the moral fault of a neighbor;

- of **detraction** who, without objectively valid reason, discloses another's faults and failings to persons who did not know them;²⁷⁹

- of **calumny** who, by remarks contrary to the truth, harms the reputation of others and gives occasion for false judgments concerning them.

Both detraction and calumny involve speaking ill of another person to a third party.

- In the case of **detraction**, the charges are **true** things the listener did not know.
- **Calumny** casts the other person in an unflattering light, shredding their reputation by spreading things that are **false**.

Both calumny and detraction injure and can even destroy the other person's reputation and honor.

- Both offend against the virtues of justice and charity (CCC #2479).

B. Judging your Brother and the Law

“But who are you that you judge your neighbor?”

Indulging in slander or detraction is harmful because it uses words to put others down and lift oneself up. James warns that one who speaks evil vaults himself above the law and therefore into the place of God who alone is the **“lawgiver and judge”** of our neighbor.

VII. AGAINST PRESUMPTION (4:13-17)

[13] Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and get gain";

[14] whereas you do not know about tomorrow. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

[15] Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that."

[16] As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

[17] Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

A. Control of One's Future

The persons to whom James is speaking (v.13) presume that they are in control of the future – of the timing and duration of events: where they will go, what they will do, and what they will achieve.

This is arrogance or presumption, for no one knows for certain what the next day will hold (let alone the next year!) or how long our lives will last.

These persons are arrogant and boasting in their own powers as if God does not exist.

- They lack the humility that will allow them to change direction at the prompting of the Holy Spirit.
- They lack the trust in God that would allow them to step out in a direction that didn't "make sense" or whose end was not known.

B. The Proper Attitude

Rather than presuming we know what can happen and determine our future, James says we should plan in the light of God's providence while recognizing His hand in our lives.

We should preface our plans by saying "***If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that.***"

C. The Two Paths

James lays out two common paths or attitudes.

- The first is self-centered, proud, and arrogant. It plans ahead for the greatest personal gain and boasts of all that it will achieve.
- The second recognizes the brevity of life. It plans ahead but is sensitive to the will of God, willing to change and seeking to do His will.

The person who is aware of the preciousness of time will realize that it is a valuable commodity, not to be wasted. It is a currency that should be invested in eternity.

Preparation for Week #5 – A Warning to the Rich (James 5:1-6)

- Review “Study Questions” in the ICSB for James, Chapters 4 and 5 (see pages 24-25).
- Read carefully and prayerfully James Chapter 5 in the IGNATIUS Catholic Study Bible (ICSB).