

IX. The Way of Humility

January 27/29/30, 2020

James 4:1-10

OT: Pr. 3:34; Ps. 18:27; Hos. 1:2; 9:1

NT: Lk. 6:25; 14:7-11

Aim: To recognize our sin and to repent of it, knowing that God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

[Note: *MacArthur* takes much of this passage as directed to unbelievers and hence a description of repentance unto salvation. All other commentators take the historical view that this passage is directed toward believers in sin who need to repent and be restored to fellowship with God.]

MacArthur: Another key indicator of true saving faith is one's attitude toward the world.... The central truth in the present passage (4:1-6) is: 'Friendship with the world is hostility toward God' (see 4:4). Genuine spiritual life and faithful Christian living involve separation from the world and all its countless contaminations.

Morgan: The message of the last verse in chapter 3 and the first verse in chapter 4 are in striking contrast to each other. James speaks much of peace at the end of Chapter 3; but the subject, as Chapter 4 begins, is war and conflict. Peace has its source in divine wisdom, but strife and conflict have had their source in evil desire. James is not discussing war in the sense of conflict between nations or war as a social disorder. He is dealing specifically with strife and feuding and quarreling among members of the body of Christ.

Moo: James's discussion of wisdom in vv. 13-18 is very specifically focused. He is not really interested in talking about wisdom per se, but in that fruit of wisdom which brings order and peace to the church. Seen in this light, vv. 13-18 prepare the way perfectly for James's rebuke of quarreling in the church. The beginning of chapter 4, then, does not introduce a new topic, but a shift of focus within the same topic. James's commendation of peacemakers in v. 18 flows naturally into a discussion of the community problems that created so strong a need for peacemakers.

Doriani: In this passage, James's long implicit opposition to pride becomes explicit. In earlier chapters, for example, he opposes the hypocrites who claim to be religious but show no fruit. He chides those who claim to care for the poor, but do nothing to help them. And hypocrisy is the cousin of pride, for it plays a role, in the hope of gaining recognition. James also opposes *boasting*, the boasting of the tongue (3:5), the boasting of the ambitious (3:14).... Pride is one of the parents of boasting (insecurity is the other). James's interest in pride deepens in 3:13-18. There we saw that the wisdom of this world is marked by envy and selfish ambition, and both of them are akin to pride.

Doriani: James has quietly promoted humility as well. He has presented three tests of true religion: care for the poor, control of the tongue, and separation from the world's pollutions.... Now, in 4:1-6, he evaluates our relationship to the world. At first glance it seems that James starts a new line of thought. In 3:13, he asks, 'Who is wise and understanding among you?' Here in 4:1 he asks, 'What causes fights and quarrels among you?' But the two questions are closely related. James says that those who have wisdom from heaven show it by their beautiful life (3:13), but those who live by worldly wisdom experience 'disorder and every evil practice' (3:16). James 3 praises the wisdom that produces peace and righteousness (3:18). James 4

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returns to worldly wisdom and explores the disorders and evils he has recently mentioned (3:16; 4:1-3).

A. Conflict (James 4:1-3)

1. Uncontrolled Passions (4:1)

a) External Conflict (4:1a)

¹What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?

Doriani: If we return to James 3:14-16, we see that worldly wisdom leads to selfish ambition and envy. Unchecked, envy causes disorder and other evils.... James 4:1 says worldly wisdom leads to fights and struggles.

Morgan: James...closed chapter 3 on a positive note – peace will come to those who make peace. But now he returns to the situation at hand: the body is torn apart by internal strife and fighting. As a master teacher, he uses a rhetorical question to address the problem, and then proceeds to elaborate on the perils of unrestrained lusts among the body of Christ. ‘Wars’ is from *polemoi* and ‘conflicts’ is from *maxai*, which could also be translated ‘fightings.’ The word shows a duplication of thought – a real concern on the heart of the writer.

MacArthur: The Greek text of this sentence has no verb, and reads more literally, ‘Whence quarrels and whence conflicts among you?’ *Polemos* (‘quarrels’), from which we get the English ‘polemics,’ relates to general, prolonged, and serious disputing or combat and is often rendered ‘war’ (e.g., Mt. 24:6; Heb. 11:35; Rev. 11:7; 16:14). ‘Conflicts’ translates *machē*, which refers to a specific fight or battle. Both terms are used here metaphorically of violent interpersonal relationships, which, in the extreme, can result even in murder (v. 2). ‘Among you’ indicates that these combative relationships were between members of the churches to whom James wrote.

Moo: The word translated *quarrels* in the NIV (*machai*) means ‘battles’ or ‘strife’ of any kind. When it is combined with the first word (*polemoi*), which almost always refers to literal wars or battles, and the use of the word ‘kill’ in v. 2, a good case can then be made that James is deploring actual violence among members of the community. While we might consider such a situation unlikely at first sight (not even the Corinthian church was that bad!), one can in fact make a pretty good case for it.... While it is true that the Greek words translated ‘fights’ and ‘kill’ in the NIV normally refer to physical violence, the word *machai* points in a different direction. It, too, can refer to violent conflicts (e.g., Jos. 4:13), but most of its occurrences in the LXX and all three of its other occurrences in the NT (2 Cor. 7:5; 2 Tim. 2:23; Titus 3:9) denote verbal quarrels or inward anxiety.... and while the former word in James’s question (*polemos*) usually denotes physical violence, it, too, occasionally has a metaphorical meaning.... Both words, then, resemble their English counterparts, ‘battle,’ ‘fight,’ in that they can refer to verbal disputes as well as armed conflicts.... We think that this metaphorical meaning is likely here, despite the presence of the word ‘kill’ in verse 2.... Particularly significant is the fact that the problem of community strife fits perfectly into the larger topic that James develops in this part of the letter. For disputes are almost always accompanied by harsh words, criticism, and slander—the misuse of the tongue that James castigates (3:1-12; 4:11-12; 5:9).

Hughes: The hounded Jewish congregations of the Dispersion were shot through with strife. They were experience class conflicts between the gold-fingered rich and their many poor (cp.

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2:1-11). Rival would-be teachers grasped at the imagined good life of being Christian rabbis (literally ‘great ones’) (cp. 1:19-26; 3:1). They boiled with ‘bitter jealousy’ and ‘selfish ambition’ and fell to ‘disorder and every vile practice. (3:14, 16). They praised God in church at every mention of His name, saying ‘Blessed by He! Blessed be He!’ and then verbally cursed their fellow parishioners on the street (3:9-10).

b) *Internal Conflict (4:1b)*

(1) Passions (4:1b)

Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

Morgan: What causes both the slow burn and the white-hot flashes of anger and rancor among them? ‘Evil pleasures’ or ‘passions’ translates *hēdonōn*. The Greek word usually refers to evil desires, but it should not be understood as sexual lusts only. The word includes any kind of lust for power, position, or prestige that seeks to dominate. The desire to ‘have it my way or else’ has caused much strife in the body of Christ.

Moo: The source of these quarrels, James now goes on to note, is *your desires that battle within you*. *Desires* translates the Greek word, *hēdonē*, which means simply ‘pleasure, but often with the connotation of a sinful, self-indulgent pleasure (we get our word ‘hedonism’ from it). It consistently has this negative meaning in the NT (Lk. 8:14; Titus 3:3; 2 Pe. 2:13).

MacArthur: Friendship with the world not only creates conflict with other people, but also conflict within the worldly person himself. The sources of external conflicts among people invariably arise from internal conflicts within each person.... First, James plainly states that ‘the source’ of internal conflicts is ‘pleasures.’ ‘Pleasures’ translates *hēdonōn*, from which ‘hedonist’ and ‘hedonism’ are derived. In the New Testament, the word is always used in a negative, ungodly sense. Hedonism is the uncontrolled personal desire to fulfill every passion and whim that promises sensual satisfaction and enjoyment. This desire to fulfill these ‘pleasures’ comes, of course, from selfishness which is opposed to God and the Word of God.

Hughes: One word here bares the heart of this verse—the word ‘passions.’ In the Greek this is *hedone*, from which we derive the English word *hedonism*, the belief that pleasure is the chief good in life. In primary sense here is *pleasures*. James is saying in essence, ‘Don’t your fights come from your *desire for pleasures* that battle within you?’ The strife and trouble in the church for the last two thousand years has been rooted in the overreaching personal desires of her people for personal pleasure and enjoyment.... Pleasure is not sinful per se, but what *is* wrong is a driving desire for pleasures.... James’ emphasis is on a feverish search for one’s own pleasures and gratifications.

Dorani: In the abstract, passions and desires can be good or bad.... But in English, we usually say we hope or aspire or wish to do good things. ‘Passion’ usually suggests lack of emotional control. The word also has sexual overtones in English and in Greek, often referring to disorderly and sexual desires. For James, the desires are definitely not good. They are appetites for material things, for sensual delights, and for sexual pleasures. The overriding factor is the yearning for satisfaction.

(2) Members (4:1b)

Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

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Moo: The military imagery with which the verse opens is carried over into this assertion as well, as James describes desires as ‘battling,’ waging war’ ‘in your members’ (NIV substitutes ‘within you’ for this phrase). The ‘members’ (Gk. *melē*) might be the ‘parts’ of the individual human body or the ‘parts’ of the Christian church: believers. The former is a bit more likely when we consider the close parallel to this language in 1 Pe. 2:11: ‘Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.’

Morgan: The battleground for these passions is in the ‘members’ of the body. ‘Members’ (*melesin*) was used in 3:6 where the tongue is set among the members of the physical body. Here, the members may refer to individuals in the body of Christ or it may be consistent with 3:6 and mean those members of the human body from which arise desire and lust. Either way, these believers need to understand that their lusts and selfish desires amount to a campaign (‘wage war’ is from *strateuomenōn*), against what is godly and Spirit-filled. James graphically depicts members of the spiritual body as walking ‘civil wars.’

MacArthur: These ungodly pleasures, in fact, ‘wage war in your members,’ James says, referring not to church members, but to the physical and mental elements of the body, which contain man’s fallen flesh or humanness (cp. Rom. 1:24; 6:12-13; 7:18-23). It is the ‘war’ of the unbeliever’s flesh with his soul and conscience, which, despite the corruption of the Fall, has enough awareness of God and His truth (Rom. 1:18-19) to be disturbed when he sins.

Dorani: James says there are fights ‘among you’ because of passions ‘that are at war within you.’ Literally, the last phrase says those passions are at war ‘in your members.’ In this verse, ‘members’ means the members of faculties within one person, not the various members of the church. Selfish passions make believers wage war within themselves, as their desire to serve Christ and neighbor conflicts with the desire to serve self.

Hughes: James is explicit about how this searching for pleasure works misery in one’s life. As a person is victimized by conflicting desires, his or her inner life becomes a battleground. The old nature, with its self-seeking focus on personal pleasure, battles against the new nature (cp. Rom. 7:21-23; Gal. 5:18), and selfish pleasure-seeking dominates. This in turn fosters a self-focus that naturally diminishes the importance of others and enthrones one’s pleasures as the goal of life. This brings relational war with those around us, especially others in the church. Such narcissistic embrace of one’s own pleasures as the chief end of life, whether it be sensual, materialistic, professional, or positional, is the bane of the church.

2. Unrequited Pleasure-Seeking (4:2)

Dorani: James 4:2 says that this internal conflict leads to external conflict. Whenever envy and selfish ambition create battles *within* us, they disrupt relations *outside* us.

a) *Desire and Murder (4:2a)*

(1) Desire (4:2a)

²*You desire and do not have, so you murder.*

Morgan: In verse 1 James chided the readers for their evil pleasures; here he uses the more familiar word for lust, *epithumia*. Literally, the word means ‘to be hot [*thermal*] for a thing.’ Our desires arise from our innermost being and our bodies carry out those lusts and desires.

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MacArthur: When desires for the wrong kinds of pleasures are frustrated and unfulfilled, they also wage *external* war. The verb *epithumeō*, (to ‘lust’) refers to having a desire or longing of any kind, but the context makes it clear that the desire mentioned here is inordinate, misdirected and sinful. James does not mention a specific object of desire, doubtless because the particular object does not matter as far as his point here is concerned. When *any* strong, sinful ‘lust’ is not gratified, the worldly person is prone to lash out in angry frustration, sometimes even committing ‘murder.’

Moo: The verb here is *epithymeō*, another word that means ‘desire’.... ‘Envy’ (*phthonos*) and ‘jealousy’ (*zēlos*; cp. 3:14 and 16; and the verb *zēloō* in this verse) inevitably lead to hostile acts, such as quarrels, murder, and wars.... Frustrated desire, James makes clear, is what is breeding this intense strife that is convulsing the community.

(2) Murder (4:2a)

²*You desire and do not have, so you murder.*

Moo: Just how intense was this strife? Here, we must tackle the difficult ‘you kill’ (*phoneuete*).... James makes clear that the problems he is describing were within the community (‘among you’ [v. 1]). It strains credulity to suppose that James would pass so quickly over so serious a matter within the community. Nor would a zealot impulse lead to violence against fellow religionists, however strong the differences of opinion. But if we do not give ‘you kill’ its normal sense, what are the alternatives here? ... [An] alternative, attractive because James so often depends on the teaching of Jesus, is to interpret ‘you kill’ in a spiritual way: ‘you are murderously angry’ (see Mt. 5:21-26; 1 Jn. 2:15). However, nothing in James’s context prepares us for such an interpretation. Perhaps, then, the best alternative is to take ‘you kill’ in the normal, literal sense, but as a hypothetical eventuality rather than as an actual occurrence. ... The tradition to which James is indebted often portrayed murder as the end product of envy. James is warning his readers about just where their envious desires might lead them if not checked in time. James’s readers are not yet killing each other. But ‘fightings’ and ‘wars’ are already in evidence among them; and if covetous zeal goes unrestrained, the danger of actual violence is real.

Morgan: But had things become as bad that Christians were actually guilty of killing? This verse has generated long and complicated discussions by many students of the Bible. The Greek word for ‘kill’ is *phoneute*, and it carries a wide range of meanings that may help us in this conundrum. The primary meaning is murder arising from the motive of bloodthirstiness, but it can also carry the idea of ‘destroy.’ This metaphorical meaning seems to be what James has in mind – ‘you destroy and assassinate the character and reputation of others because of your jealous lusts.’ Had James referred to literal murder the perpetrators would have been hauled into civil courts and executed.

MacArthur: ‘Murder’ translates the verb *phoneuō*, which, in this context, could include murderous hatred, extremely destructive behavior, and even suicide. When the lusting person cannot achieve his desired goals—whether for reputation, prestige, sexual gratification, money, power, escape through drugs or alcohol, success, possessions, the affections of another person, or whatever—the result is often catastrophic to others and always destructive of oneself.

Dorani: It is very unlikely that his readers were guilty of literal murder. The word for ‘fights’ (*machai*) can refer to physical violence, but in the New Testament it usually refers to verbal

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conflicts or internal struggles (2 Cor. 7:5; 2 Tim. 2:23; Titus 3:9)... The language of warfare and violence aptly describes the strife, acrimony, criticism, and misrepresentation that occur when people use words to gain supremacy.

Hughes: Having established that the root of fighting is the pursuit of pleasure, James proceeds to introduce its miserable pathology in verse 2a.... This is a jarring indictment, to say the least, because James says of *the church*, ‘you murder.’ This is shocking! Some have dismissed this as an error or, more commonly, have seen it as a metaphorical statement. But there is no compelling evidence for either view. Moreover, the case of David’s murder of Uriah the Hittite is almost a letter-for-letter acting out as what we have here.... Very likely something like this had happened in one of the churches, scandalizing everyone and bringing disgrace on the name of Christ. Whatever the exact case, Christians were brought to terrible lows in their frustrate pursuits of pleasure and became homicidal in heart (cp. Mt. 5:21-22).

b) *Covet and Conflict (4:2b)*

You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.

MacArthur: *Zeloō*, here rendered ‘envious,’ is a synonym of *epithumeō*, and connotes an even stronger, more compelling feeling of desire. It is the word from which we get ‘zealous’ and ‘zealot.’ The noun form is rendered ‘jealously’ in James 3:14, 16. When people harbor such fierce desires but ‘cannot obtain’ what they covet, they ‘fight and quarrel.’ Marital conflicts, family conflicts, job conflicts, national conflicts—all these are the result of unsatisfied personal lust and envying.

Morgan: Why does this happen? Because ‘you are jealous and not able to get what you want.’ ‘Jealous’ in the Greek gives us our word *zeal*. It can carry negative or positive connotations. Here it means the ardent desire to obtain something. When one chooses pleasure instead of God, even murder can be the result.

Hughes: This section oozes with frustration and disappointing of unrequired pleasure-seeking. ‘You desire [literally: lust for] and do not have, so you murder [frustration]. You covet [literally: hotly desire] and cannot obtain [frustration], so you fight and quarrel.’ The frantic pleasure-first life invariably goes after that which cannot satisfy.

Moo: With ‘you quarrel and fight,’ James returns to the point at which he began in v. 1. We therefore have something of a chiasm in vv. 1-2b:

- A. Fights and quarrels (v. 1a)
- B. come from wrong desires (v. 1b)
- B’. Frustrated desire (v. 2a) leads to
- A’. quarrels and fights (v. 2b)

3. Unanswered Prayer (4:2c-3)

a) *You Do Not Ask (4:2c)*

You do not have, because you do not ask.

Moo: The end of v 2 therefore goes with v. 3, as James explains why his readers’ desire to ‘have’ has met with failure rather than success. *You do not have because you do not ask God.* What is it that James’s readers want to have? He nowhere says in these verses, but the context suggests

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an answer: the kind of wisdom that will enable them to gain recognition as leaders in the community.

MacArthur: As would be expected, worldly, ungodly desire not only is uncontrolled and unfulfilled, but also selfish.... Leading up to his point about selfishness, James first says that worldly unbelievers ‘do not have because’ they ‘do not ask.’ Many of them do not even think of asking God for help of any kind, because they consider themselves self-sufficient, fully able to take care of themselves. They believe that all their needs and wants can be met by human means through their own wisdom, power, and diligence.... Consequently, it never occurs to them to ask Him for anything.

Morgan: ‘You seek to fulfill your desires in all the wrong places and ways,’ James pleads. Christians so often battle with one another for that which they really do not need. The only way out of the mess is to go to God in humble, believing prayer, confident that God gives His children what they most need (Mt. 6:33).

Dorani: James understands how difficult it is to present selfish requests to the Lord, regardless of the intensity of the desire. The heart is free when we pray for friends and family, for kingdom and church. It can be harder to pray for our legitimate needs. It may seem a bit selfish. And perhaps we are afraid to hear God say no.... But we can hardly pray at all for clearly selfish desires.

Hughes: The Bible is repeatedly clear that a driving desire for pleasure is ruinous to the prayer life.... The way this works is that, first, the pleasure-mad Christian, who has some spiritual sensitivity, realizes his prayers are inappropriate. Somehow, he senses that his desire for a Maserati may not be a spiritual essential. So, he asks for nothing. In fact, he doesn’t pray much at all because few of the things he wants are high on the divine priority list.

b) You Do Not Receive (4:3)

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

MacArthur: Many unbelievers *do* ask God for things, all sorts of things. But, as James continues to explain, they ‘ask and do not receive, because’ they ‘ask with wrong motives, so that’ they ‘may spend’ it on their ‘pleasures.’ They do not ask for things in order for God’s goodness and grace to be magnified or for the sake of His glory and honor. They do not ask in order to be able to fulfill His perfect and divine will but to fulfill their own sinful and selfish wills. *Aiteō* (‘ask’) is the same verb used in 1:5-6 and carries the idea of pleading, begging, imploring.... ‘With wrong motives’ translates the single Greek word *kakōs*, which has the basic meaning of bad, evil, or wicked, as it is sometimes rendered. Linking that word to ‘motives’ is appropriate but only implied. The wrong motivation is the desire to spend God’s gifts on one’s own ‘pleasures.’ *Dapanaō* (‘spend’) means to completely use up or squander and was used by Jesus to describe the prodigal son’s wasteful squandering of his inheritance (Lk. 15:13). The ‘pleasures’ mentioned here are the same kinds as those in verse 1 that cause internal warfare, pleasures that God does not honor.

Morgan: Self-centered believers pray, but they pray just like they live: corruptly. We can ask for the right things but with the wrong motives. James had already warned about asking with the wrong attitude, doubt (1:5); here he instructs us not to ask with the wrong motive.... The negative progression continues as the author expands on asking ‘corruptly.’ They do not receive because they wanted to indulge their evil pleasures (again, as in v. 1). ‘Indulge’ translates

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dapanaō, ‘to spend.’ It is a neutral word generally, but here it means the wasteful and selfish spending of what God graciously gives. Jesus promised in Matthew 7:7 that we could ask and it would be given to us. But Jesus clearly had in mind that the focus of such praying is to further God’s glory and His kingdom. He does not give us what we want so that we might spend it on our own selfish pleasures.

Moo: ‘Spend freely’ (the verb is *dapanaō*) can have a neutral sense (Mk. 5:26; Acts 21:24; 2 Cor. 12:15), but the meaning here is negative, as in Luke 15:14, where the prodigal son is said to have ‘freely spent’ all of his father’s inheritance. Jesus had promised, ‘Ask, and it will be given you’ (Mt. 7:7). But clearly Jesus had in mind that asking which has as its focus and motive God’s name, God’s kingdom, and God’s will (Mt. 6:9-10), not an asking that had the purpose of the indulgence of those ‘pleasures’ (*hēdonai*) that are at war with our souls (cp. v. 1).

Hughes: Secondly, some pleasure-seeking believers do express their wrongly motivated desires in prayer, but do not receive.... A pleasure-driven life finds Heaven made of brass. The petty circumference of its requests simply do not interest the Father.

Doriani: Yet, James says, some do pray ‘that you spend what you get on your pleasures.’ God denies the request, because we ask wrongly, wickedly. He will not answer a prayer that aims no higher than the belly.... Why would God answer the prayer of a believer who wants to live like an enemy of Christ?

4. Summary

Hughes: Is James saying that Christians are never to passionately desire pleasure? The answer is a resounding ‘No!’ ... The Christian life is not a life of negation, but of affirmation and enjoyment. In fact, in a way Christians ought to be the biggest pleasure-seekers in the universe. How is this? First, we must understand that God is the author of all pleasure.... Second, man is naturally made to seek pleasure.... Third, God wants us to immerse ourselves in His pleasure by immersing ourselves in Him.... His desire to be *glorified* and your desire to be *satisfied* are not irreconcilable! Pursue Him with all you have, for every genuine pleasure is from His hand.

B. Condemnation (James 4:4-6)

Moo: The abrupt and harsh *you adulterous people* marks the beginning of one of the most strongly worded calls to repent that we find anywhere in the NT.... Throughout the section (4:4-10) James depends heavily on the OT, quoting it twice and reflecting its vocabulary and themes in every verse.

1. Hostility against God (4:4)

a) Adulterous People (4:4a)

⁴*You adulterous people!*

Morgan: Abruptly and harshly James exclaims: *moichalides* (adulterers)! He has already called them foolish in 2:20; now he indicts them as spiritually unfaithful people.... James now preaches in the style of the Old Testament prophets and uses a metaphor common to them. The term ‘adulterers’ was used by the prophets to speak of Israel as the covenant people who committed spiritual adultery in going after pagan gods (Hos. 9:1; Jer. 3; Is. 54:5). Furthermore, the church is called the bride of Christ in Ephesians 5:24-25. So, the adultery James speaks of consists of

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loving the world and its pleasures more than the Lord. ‘Adulteresses’ is the plural form of adulterer, so referring to men as well as women.

Moo: After the many times that James has called his readers ‘brothers’ ... or even ‘my dear brothers,’ ... his address as *you adulterous people* really catches our attention. The Greek word James uses is actually feminine; see ‘adulteresses’ in the NASB.... A literal reading would suggest that James is accusing his female readers of engaging in adulterous activity. But this is unlikely. Nothing in the context would suggest such an accusation, and James goes on in vv. 5-10 to castigate his readers quite generally. The key to the feminine form and to the accusation that James is making here is found in the OT, especially the prophetic books. The prophets frequently compare the relationship between Yahweh and His people to a marriage relationship (e.g., Is. 54:5-6; Jer. 3:20; Is. 57:3; Ez. 16:38; 23:45).... But it is in Hosea that this imagery reaches its pinnacle. The Lord commands Hosea to marry a prostitute so that her unfaithfulness might poignantly and painfully reveal the tragic dalliance of Israel with foreign gods (e.g., Hos. 2:5-7).... James, following this tradition, uses ‘adulteresses’ to label his readers as unfaithful people of God. By seeking *friendship with the world*, they are, in effect, committing spiritual adultery.

MacArthur: Adultery is the sin of violating a marriage covenant by having sexual intimacy with someone other than a spouse. In referring to ‘adulteresses,’ James uses the term metaphorically in a way that his Jewish readers would clearly understand (cp. Mt. 12:39; 16:15; Mk. 8:38), referring to men as well as women. He is not talking about sexual but spiritual infidelity, as the term is often used in the Old Testament of God’s unfaithful people, Israel (cp. Jer. 3:8; 2 Chr. 21:11, 13; Ps. 73:27; Ez. 16:32; Hos. 1:2).... Scripture nowhere uses the terms *adulterer* or *adulteress* figuratively of Gentiles, because only Israel had a covenant relationship with God to be unfaithful to, just as husbands and wives have the covenant relationship of marriage. Gentiles could be fornicators, as it were, but not adulterers—a contemptible distinction reserved for Israel, the unfaithful wife.

Dorani: When James says, ‘you adulterous people,’ he makes a specific accusation. The charge is spiritual adultery, not spiritual fornication, because the people are joined to Christ. They are married to Jesus, but they run after other gods. This endangers their relationship, their marriage, to Him. This is the language of the prophets who charged Israel with adultery. James even uses the feminine word ‘adulteress’ to evoke the prophetic tradition (cp. Is. 57:2-3, 8).

b) *Friendship with the World (4:4b)*

(1) Friendship (4:4b)

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?

Morgan: The choice is clear – if one wishes to be a friend (*philia*) of the world, he will be at hostility (*exthra*) with God. Spiritual adultery as synonymous with hostility or enmity (*echthros*) toward God certainly has its basis in Scripture (see further 110:1; Mt. 22:24; Mk. 12:36; Lk; 20:43; Acts 2:35; Heb. 1:13). James’ words could not be more relevant for today. Instead of being faithfully wedded, we can easily, by our evil ways, turn our backs on God and commit spiritual adultery.

MacArthur: ‘Friendship’ translates the noun *philia*, which is used only here in the New Testament. Its verb form, *phileō*, is often rendered ‘love’ (e.g., Mt. 6:5; 10:37; 1 Cor. 16:22) and is even used of the Father’s love for the Son (Jn. 5:20) and of the Father’s and the Son’s love for

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those who have saving faith (Jn. 11:3; 16:27; Rev. 3:19). Though they are often used as synonyms in the New Testament, the more common and stronger verb for love (*agapaō*) seems to be more volitional, whereas *phileō* is more emotional. James uses *philia* to describe intense and deep affection for the evil world system.

Doriani: In antiquity, as today, *true* friends shared a mindset and an outlook on life. They shared interests, values, and goals. They saw life in much the same way. They shared goods as necessary. They cared for each other and worked together effectively because they agreed how the work should be done. Christians are the friends of God in this high, restricted sense.... We can be friendly toward anyone—showing kindness and concern. We should be good neighbors and good co-workers. But in the deepest sense of ‘friendship,’ we cannot be friends with the world because we reject its values.

Moo: We speak rather casually of ‘friends’ in our day, but in the Hellenistic world, friendship involves ‘sharing all things’ in a unity both spiritual and physical. We can therefore understand why James insists that *Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God*.

(2) World (4:4b)

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?

MacArthur: Those...who do not belong to Christ belong to ‘the world.’ They have a longing to be involved with the world’s drives, impulses, attractions, and people, for which they have a determined and habitual attachment. For that reason, James cannot be referring to believers who are temporarily attracted by the things of ‘the world’ and fall into sin for a while. He is not speaking of occasional spiritual weaknesses in Christians, but of the continual, willing, enjoyed, and ungodly drives of unbelievers. A believer could never be called an enemy of God. *Kosmos* (‘world’) does not refer to the physical earth or universe but rather to the spiritual reality of the man-centered, Satan-directed system of this present age, which is hostile to God and God’s people. It refers to the self-centered, godless value system and mores and fallen mankind. The goal of ‘the world’ is self-glory, self-fulfillment, self-indulgence, self-satisfaction, and every other form of self-serving, all of which amounts to ‘hostility toward God.’

Morgan: John gives us a clear definition of the world (*kosmos*): ‘the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life’ (1 Jn. 2:16). It is the world system, the humanistic philosophy of life that does not follow God and His standards.

Hughes: This requires some reverent and careful thought. James is not saying friendship with *people* in the world is hatred *toward* God or makes anyone His adversary. Rather, friendship with the *world*—the *kosmos*, the evil world system that lies under the power of Satan—this friendship makes one God’s enemy (cp. Jn. 14:30; 2 Cor. 4:4; Gal. 1:4; 1 Jn. 5:19).

Moo: We have no evidence that James’s readers were overtly disclaiming God and consciously deciding to follow the world instead. But their tendency to imitate the world by discriminating against people (2:1-13), by speaking negatively of others (3:1-12), by exhibiting ‘bitter envy’ and ‘selfish ambition’ (3:13-18), and by pursuing their own destructive pleasures (4:1-3) amounted to just that. James, as it were, wants to raise the stakes so that his readers see their compromising conduct for what it really is. God tolerates no rival. When believers behave in a worldly manner, they demonstrate that, at that point, their allegiance is to the world rather than to God.

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c) Enemy with God (4:4c)

Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

MacArthur: Bouomai (‘wishes’) connotes more than just wanting a desire or wish to be fulfilled. It carries the stronger idea of choosing one thing over another. Similarly, *kathistēmi* (‘makes himself’) means to appoint, or ordain, also indicating conscious intent. Whether he recognizes it is his own mind or not, a person who ‘wishes to be a friend of the world’ system has chosen to make ‘himself an enemy of God.’ In his heart, his desire for ‘the world’ supersedes any supposed positive ideas he may have about God. He does not have a neutral relationship with God, as an impartial bystander or distant admirer, but is in the fullest sense His ‘enemy.’ And to be God’s enemy is to remain in spiritual darkness, daily grow more it for eternal death, and have the sovereign King of the universe as your foe.

Hughes: God regards pleasure-dominated believers adversarially, as verse 4 makes so clear.... We understand that Christian, someone who has trusted in Christ alone for salvation, can become ‘an enemy of God’—God’s adversary. This is horrifying! ... Believers who choose to pursue the pleasures of the world are ineluctably drawn to friendship with the forces of the world-system, which are at the very least indifferent to God and at the worst openly hostile to Him. These friendships will ultimately spawn in the believer’s heart the same indifferences and hostilities, thereby making a true Christian into a practical enemy of the God he claims and desires to love.

Moo: ‘Enemy,’ especially in light of the OT background...must involve hostility of God toward the believer as well as that of the believer toward God.

2. Jealousy of the Spirit (4:5)

Moo: James’s striking application of the OT imagery of God as the spouse of His people in v. 4 is the key to understanding this verse. Verse 5 explains why flirtation with the world is so serious a matter by bringing to mind the jealousy of the Lord, which demands total, unreserved, unwavering allegiance from the people with whom He has joined Himself. But this reading of the verse is by no means the only one possible. Indeed, James 4:5 is one of the most difficult verses in the NT. The degree of difficulty is revealed by the fact that our major English translations provide quite distinct interpretations.

Morgan: Verse 5 presents us with three major problems.

Hughes: This is the most difficult passage in James, for two reasons.

a) The Scripture Citation (4:5a)

⁵Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says...

*Morgan: First, to what Scripture does James appeal? ... In keeping with most New Testament writers, James backs up his argument in verses 1-4 with an appeal to Scripture. ‘To no avail’ translates *kenōs* ‘empty’ or ‘in vain,’ used in 2:20 of the empty-headed person and in Philippians 2 of the self-emptying of Christ. This is problematic, because we have no citation from the Old Testament that says exactly what follows. Some writers suggest James is making an interpretive comment on Scripture in general, without reference to a specific passage. Others see James referring to some text now lost to us, but well-known to his audience. Still other scholars...think James is giving a rendering of Exodus 20:5. It seems best to...understand James to be using his own paraphrased form of an Old Testament reference.*

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Hughes: First, its statement that the ‘Scripture says’ leads us to look for an Old Testament source, but none can be found in canonical (or even non-canonical) writings. So, we conclude that James probably is referring to the general theme of God’s jealousy as it is expressed in various places in the Old Testament (cp. Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Zech. 8:2).

Moo: The difficulty is that the word that James ‘quotes’ does not reproduce any OT text.... *Scripture* (*graphē*) is limited to the canonical OT as well as NZT. If we interpret the verse...as a reference to the jealousy of God, OT support is, of course abundant (e.g., Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Zech. 8:2). Some insist that the singular ‘scripture’ must introduce a single OT, but this is not clear.... We can identify that which *graphē* speaks about as the biblical theme of God’s jealousy for His people.

Doriani: James brings his indictment of worldly wisdom and selfish ambition to its climax with a probing question.... Notice that when James writes ‘Scripture says,’ he is not quoting one passage. No Old Testament text says, ‘The spirit He caused to live in us envies intensely,’

MacArthur: There is no Scripture, Old or New Testament, that corresponds to [the cited quotation]. Whatever reference James is making to Scripture, he is speaking of its general teaching, not a specific passage.

b) *The Scripture Connection (4:5a-b)*

⁵*Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”?*

Morgan: *Second*, should we join ‘toward envy’ or ‘enviously’ (*pros phthonon*) with the introductory formula or with the Scripture James is citing? In other words, do the Scriptures argue ‘with envy’ or does ‘with envy’ belong with the spirit in the reference quoted by James? We have nothing close to a parallel with the Scriptures speaking ‘with envy,’ so it seems best to conclude that the words go with the scriptural reference itself.

c) *The Scripture Content (4:5b)*

...“*He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us*”? (ESV)

‘He yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us’ (RSV).

‘God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us’ (NSRV).

‘The Spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy’ (KJV).

‘He [God] jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us’ (NASB).

‘The spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely’ (NIV).

‘The Spirit he caused to live in us longs jealously’ (NIV marginal note).

(1) Translation Issues – Moo

Moo: Several matters in the text call for careful attention: the identity of the Scripture that James refers to in the opening words; the reference of the term ‘spirit’ (*pneuma*); the meaning and object of the verb *epipothei* (translated variously as ‘desire,’ ‘yearn,’ ‘long’); and the meaning of the term *phthonon* (divine ‘jealousy’ or human ‘envy’?).

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Moo: Two major interpretations are possible, although other minor differences yield a bewildering variety of alternatives. 1) James is referring to God’s jealousy for His people (e.g., ESV, RSV, NRSV).... 2) James is referring to the human tendency to be envious (e.g. NIV)

Moo: 1. The Greek word for ‘spirit,’ being neuter, can function either as the subject of the verb *epipothei* or as its object. So, in the second alternative, ‘spirit’ is taken as the subject and interpreted to mean the natural spirit of every human being. In the first alternative, however, ‘spirit’ is made the object of the verb and understood as the spirit that God breathed into man to make him a living creature (Gen. 2:7), or, alternatively, to the Holy Spirit that God has implanted in believers (cp. NLT). But if ‘spirit’ is the object of the verb, then we must supply a subject for the verb; and advocates of the first naturally supply ‘God’ as the most likely identification of the one who caused the spirit to dwell in us. On the whole, this issue is most naturally resolved in favor of the ‘divine jealousy’ interpretation. It makes best grammatical sense to take ‘God’ as the subject of both the main verb – *epipothei* – ‘desire,’ ‘yearn’ – and the subordinate verb – *katōkisen*, ‘cause to dwell.’ But if God is the subject of ‘desire’ then this desire must obviously be a positive yearning; and this means, in turn that *phthonos* must mean ‘jealousy’ rather than ‘envy.’

Moo: 2. But this last decision brings us to the second major issue creating such an ambiguity in the Greek text: the meaning of the word *phthonos*. And this issue undoubtedly favors the ‘human envy’ interpretation. For *phthonos* always has a negative connotation in biblical Greek and is naturally never used with reference to God. Moreover, as we have seen, *phthonos* is a key word in the tradition that James has used in 3:13-4:3, and in this tradition the word always describes a sinful human attitude.

Moo: 3. Closely related to our decision about the meaning of *phthonos* is the third key issue: the meaning of the verb *epipothei*, in combination with the preposition *pros*. If James is referring here to human envy, the combination will have to mean something like ‘tend toward.’ ‘Toward’ is a perfectly acceptable rendering of *pros*, but ‘tend’ is not the most natural translation of the verb. The ‘divine jealousy’ interpretation suffers from almost exactly the opposite problem. It can give the verb its normal meaning of ‘desire,’ ‘yearn,’ but must interpret the preposition in a somewhat unusual way, as an adverbial construction: ‘in a jealous manner.’ Similarly indecisive is the evidence for the general use of the verb *epipotheō*. It is never used with reference to God in biblical Greek; and this obviously favors the ‘human envy’ view. But it also always has a positive meaning in the NT; and this pattern of course, favors the ‘divine jealousy’ view.

Moo: The three key exegetical details therefore point in different directions. The grammar of the sentence (point one) favors the ‘divine jealousy’ view; the meaning of *phthonos* (point two) the ‘human envy’ interpretation; and favoring neither clearly is the third issue, the construction *epipotheō pros*.

Moo: Since, therefore, in our view the exegetical data of the verse are not conclusive, context becomes a key deciding factor. A reference to human envy can, of course, fit into this general context, for James has warned them about this sin three times (3:14, 16; 4:2). And it could be argued that a statement about human sin in v. 5 provides a more natural contrast with the ‘greater grace’ of God in v. 6. **But the immediate context provides strong, and in our opinion, decisive, support for the ‘divine jealousy’ interpretation.** Verse 5 clearly substantiates a point made in v. 4. And v. 4 focuses on the spiritual adultery that James’s readers are committing by following the world in distinction from their only true ‘spouse,’ the Lord. A reminder of God’s

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desire that His people be wholly and unreservedly His provides a beautifully appropriate substantiation of the warning against any flirtation with the attitudes and values of the world in v. 4.

(2) Translation Issues – Doriani

Doriani: The main questions are: First, does the verse speak of the human spirit or the Holy Spirit? (The question arises because the Greek did not differentiate lowercase and capital letters as we do)... Second is the intense envy or jealous yearning that James describes best understood as a positive or a negative desire? Third, is the spirit (or Spirit) the subject or the direct object of the sentence? Is the subject of the sentence the human spirit or God?

Doriani: I will confess in advance that I believe the NIV translation to be the most accurate... First, then, the context indicates that James speaks of the human spirit, not the Holy Spirit. The term ‘spirit’ (*pneuma*) appears only one other time in James, in 2:26, and that passage clearly refers to the spirit that animates people. Further, from 3:13 to 4:4 James constantly focused on the ambitions (3:14, 16) and passions of the human spirit (4:1, 3). Indeed, 4:5 sounds like the summation of James’s comments on the selfishness and disorder of the human spirit.

Doriani: Second, it seems best to take the longing negatively. To render the phrase literally the spirit ‘longs toward envy’ (Greek *pros phthonon epipothei*). If we exclude James 4:5, the verb for longing (*epipotheō*) is always positive and the noun for envy is always negative in the New Testament. But longing (*epipotheō*) can be negative in the Septuagint (Ps. 61:10), in intertestamental literature (Ecclesiasticus 25:21), and in Greek authors such as Plato and Herodotus. Yet envy (*phthonos*) is *always* a vice in Greek moral writing and in the New Testament... The decision of ESV and NASB translators to interpret envy positively, as God’s proper jealousy for His people, has two weaknesses. First, while the Bible does say God yearns jealously for His people (see Zech. 1:14), the term in our verse, *phthonos* is not used. Rather, the Septuagint uses *zēlos*. Indeed, Greek literature clearly distinguishes between *zēlos*, the jealousy one can rightly have for what belongs to him, and the envy that begrudges and wants to take what another has. The word for that envy is James’s term *phthonos*. It is no surprise, then, that God is never said to have or feel envy.

Doriani: If these are the right answers to the first two questions then the third question is resolved. The subject of the sentence is the human spirit, not God or His Spirit... **James’s point, therefore, is that Scripture rightly testifies that human history is one long story of intense envy and selfish striving.** In other words, human history is largely a record of misdirected energies. God has endowed humans with a drive to achieve, to taste glory. But alas, we put our energy in vain projects, and we fan selfish desires.

(3) Translation Issues – Morgan

Morgan: The *third* difficulty is the subject of the quoted verse. How should it be translated? 1) James is referring to God’s jealousy for His people: ‘God yearns jealously for the spirit He has made to dwell in us’ (NSRV). 2) James is referring to the human tendency to be envious, ‘the spirit He caused to live in us envies intensely’ (NIV)... 3) The Holy Spirit is the subject of the main verb, ‘The Spirit which He made to dwell within us yearns enviously.’ The first option is grammatically possible, and while God does grieve when His people go astray, this translation is not the best. ‘Envy’ (*phthonon*) or ‘jealousy’ is never used in the New Testament in a positive sense and Scripture never says that God lusts (*epipothei*, ‘to yearn after’). As for the third

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option, the Spirit imparted to us by God at salvation does, according to Galatians 5:17, lust against the flesh and He desires our completely loyalty to Himself.

Morgan: **The contrast stated by James in verse 6 leads this writer to conclude that it is option 2) above; it is the human spirit that is the subject....** The subject of the word ‘dwell’ (*katōkisen*) is God. He breathed into us the spirit of life, but that spirit imparted at creation longs perversely for the enjoyment of worldly pleasures (v. 4). This, then, is a commentary on the depravity of mankind. We have suggested that verses 4 through 6 deal with the course of conflict, and this interpretation fits quite well within that scheme. Our depraved nature yearns enviously after what is antithetical to godliness, and such yearning results in conflicts among the body of Christ.

(4) Translation Issues – Hughes

Hughes: Second, there is a dispute over how this verse ought to be translated.... The translations are divided over whether the word ‘spirit’ refers to the human spirit or the Holy Spirit. If it is the human spirit, as the NIV has it, the verse refers to the universal tendency we all have toward envy and jealousy of one another. Or it could mean that God yearns over the plight of our human spirits, which were given to us in creation, as the ESV has it. If, however, this is referring to the Holy Spirit, it means that the indwelling Holy Spirit is jealous that we do not fall to the error of friendship with the world.

Hughes: **I am convinced that the text refers to the Holy Spirit’s jealousy over us** because it best fits the argument of the context and because it touches on that grand truth so indispensable to the New Testament theology—the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Understanding that the Holy Spirit’s jealousy for us is what is meant here opens a heart-changing truth to us: even when we sin by seeking our pleasures in friendship with the world, we are greatly loved, for jealousy is an essential element of true love. We are brides of Christ, and the Holy Spirit does not want us to go somewhere else to ‘have our needs met.’ The Holy Spirit’s true love for us evokes a proper intolerance of straying affection. The personalness of this ought to steel us against wandering. The jealous Spirit is *inside* us. When we sin, He is pained! Furthermore, His jealousy is passionate, for the idea in the Greek is that He longs or yearns for us with an intense jealousy.

(5) Translation Issues – MacArthur

MacArthur: This verse is difficult to understand, and evangelical scholars do not all agree on its precise meaning. Although the NASB begins the quotation with ‘He jealously desires,’ the word ‘He’ is not in the Greek text but is supplied by the translators. The capitalization of ‘Spirit’ is also arbitrary, since the original Greek manuscripts did not capitalize words.

MacArthur: One cannot be dogmatic, but, in context, it seems that the KJV rendering is preferable: ‘The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy.’ James would therefore be saying, in effect, **‘Don’t you know that you yourselves are living proof of the veracity of Scripture, which clearly teaches that the natural man has a spirit of envy?’** That interpretation is clearly consistent with James’s emphasis in the larger passage.

3. Grace to the Humble (4:6)

a) More Grace (4:6a)

⁶*But he gives more grace.*

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Moo: If v. 5 refers to the sinful longings of the human spirit, then the *more* or ‘greater’ (*meizona*) *grace* will suggest the ability and willingness of God to overcome sinfulness: ‘He gives us grace potent enough to meet this and every other evil spirit.’ ... If, however, as we have argued, v. 5 depicts God’s jealousy for His people, then James here is reminding us that God’s grace is completely adequate to meet the requirements imposed on us by that jealousy. Our God is ‘a consuming fire,’ and his demand for our exclusive allegiance may seem terrifying. But our God is also merciful, gracious, all-loving, and willingly supplies all that we need to meet His all-encompassing demands. As Augustine has said, ‘God gives what He demands.’

Morgan: The antithesis of human envying is the grace God offers to us. Literally, the text states that He gives a greater gift (*charin*.)’ Due to the reference he quotes from Proverbs, it seems best to understand this gift to be the grace of God that enables us to overcome the natural tendency in verse 5 to lust and yearn for evil.

Doriani: But James does more than diagnose the human problem: he announces the fundamental solution: God gives grace.

Hughes: What are we to do? ... The answer [is]—more grace! This is not saving grace for every believer has that. Rather, it is literally ‘greater grace’—God’s gracious supply to live as we ought in a fallen world. As Augustine put it, ‘God gives us what He demands.’ There is always, for the believer, greater grace. This is without doubt one of the most comforting texts in all of Scripture (cp. Heb. 4:16; Rom. 5:20b)... There is always more grace.

MacArthur: Despite the natural, unbelieving, worldly hearts of men, God nevertheless ‘gives greater grace’; but He does not give it to His proud and ungodly enemies.

b) Proverbs 3:34 (4:6b)

Therefore, it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Moo: God’s grace demands response: the response of humility. James introduces this note via his quotation from Proverbs 3:34.... The humility introduced in this quotation becomes the dominant motif in the commands in vv. 7-10. God’s gift of sustaining grace is enjoyed only by those willing to admit their need and accept the gift. The *proud*, on the other hand, meet only resistance from God. God’s opposition toward the arrogant person is a recurring motif in the OT (see, e.g., Ps. 18:27; 34:18; 51:17; 72:4; 138:6; Is. 61:1; Zeph. 3:11-12). Worth mentioning is that ‘pride’ (*hyperēphania*) is often associated with jealousy and envy in Hellenistic writings. Perhaps James would want us to see here an implicit condemnation of these jealous and selfish people whom he has criticized in 3:13-4:3.

Morgan: The scripture James was alluding to in verse 5 is indefinite, but in this verse the use of the Old Testament is straightforward and clear. This quotation from Proverbs 3:34 reinforces James’ point about God providing great grace to overcome our self-centeredness.... The quotation warns against those who are proud but also clearly states the good news that God’s grace is available to those who humble themselves. ‘Oppose’ is from *antitassetai*, a compound word composed of the familiar prefix *anti* and the verb *tassō*, ‘to place or arrange.’ The verb graphically depicts God placing Himself in battle array against those who are haughty. ‘The proud’ is without the definite article in the Greek, stressing the character rather than the identity of those who God resists. The adjective (*hyperēphanois*) refers to those who are arrogant, haughty, and proud.

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MacArthur: Here, James clearly quotes from the Old Testament, specifically Proverbs 3:34 from the Septuagint...as does Peter in 1 Pe. 5:5.... In other words, if a person is consumed with worldly lusts, desires, ambitions, pride, and love, he has no claim to this ‘greater grace.’ *Antitossomai* (‘is opposed’) was used as a military term depicting a full army ready for battle. God is in full battle array, as it were, against ‘the proud,’ because pride is the basic sin from which all others issue. It is not always manifested in ways that other men can see, but it is never hidden from God’s eyes. ‘Proud’ translates the compound noun *hyuperēphanos*, composed of *huper* (‘above’) and *phainomai* (to appear, or be manifest). The idea is that of disdainfully and arrogantly supposing oneself to be above others. The term is rendered ‘arrogant’ in Romans 1:30 and 2 Tim. 3:2, and in both places is directly associated with boasting.... The picture James gives here is of a ‘proud’, defiant sinner, setting himself up as his real god, not simply in self-centeredness but in self-worship. He is an enemy of the true God and has no part in His ‘grace.’ ... God does, however, ‘give grace to the humble.’ He has always done so.

Hughes: Is there any condition to receiving this river of grace? Yes—a very slight one for some people, a Donner Pass for others. James quotes Proverbs 3:34.... The unbowed soul standing proudly before God receives no benefit from God’s falling grace. It may descend upon him, but it does not penetrate and drips away like rain from a statue. But the soul lying humbly before God is immersed—and even swims—in a sea of grace. So, while there is always ‘more grace,’ it is reserved for the lowly—the humble.

Doriani: The gospel of James suggests a test of our spiritual condition. What are your longings? Is your spirit filled with selfish or ambitious cravings for things, for experiences, for fame, for power? Or do you pursue simpler but equally misguided goals—mere prosperity and tranquility, spiced up by pleasant leisure activities, punctuated by an exotic high point? There is no harm in dreaming large dreams.... Goals prompt us to do our best. But dreams can be egotistical too. If we examine ourselves, we may find sinful cravings and envy. If we do find such sins, we should take them to God and confess them to Him. Then, James promises, God will give grace to the humble.... When our sin humbles us, when we plead for mercy, God grants the grace of forgiveness first and then restoration.

4. Summary

Doriani: So, James says, we must choose between two ways of life. There is the way of ambition, grasping, and pride, and the way of repentance and humility, which leads to peace with God, then with mankind. True repentance is more than feeling sorry. The penitent man acknowledges the sins at hand. A reader of James should repent for the sins James singles out: pride in knowledge, hearing the word but doing nothing, the reckless speech that will say anything to get a laugh or gain an advantage, the desire to fit in with society rather than to stay unpolluted by it. If we humble ourselves in genuine repentance, God promises to forgive us and exalt us with Christ.

Hughes: Whatever our condition or situation, He always gives us more grace. He gives grace to overcome *personal weaknesses*.... Perhaps your life has *insurmountable obstacles*. Perhaps a terminal disease. There is more grace. Or a loved one’s death. There is more grace. Or a shattering divorce. There is more grace. Or the bitter ashes of failure. There is more grace. There is also grace to do the *impossible*.

C. Cure (James 4:7-10)

Dorani: Repentance is the central theme in our passage.... The topic of repentance develops James's teaching on the two ways of life. Wisdom from heaven leads to a beautiful life, marked by peace and righteousness. Wisdom from the earth is marked by envy and selfish ambition and leads to a life marked by coveting, fights, quarrels, and infidelity toward God.... Everyone is motivated by envy and ambition, and everyone should confess that to God. We should face our tendency to grasp what we can. If we humbly confess this, God will give us more grace (4:6).... We should confess our sins, plead for mercy, and lay aside every demand for our due.

Dorani: James 4:6-10 begins and ends with a call to humility. To be precise, it starts with a warning that leads to a promise: 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble' (4:6). It ends with a command that leads to a promise: 'Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you' (4:10). Thus, the need for humility and the call to humility form bookends for our text. God gives grace to the humble, and we must humble ourselves before the Lord. The rest of the passage describes the life of humility. The intervening verses develop the demand for humility by exploring the two poles of divine promise and human responsibility. James 4:7 with its call to submit to God, explains 4:6. Since God opposes the proud, we should submit to Him as an act of humility. The submissive can expect to receive grace. The rest of the passage describes key elements of Christian humility and of submission to God. Notice, as James writes, that humility has nothing to do with a shy or retiring personality. Powerful and exuberant people can be humble.

Moo: Verses 7-10 contain a series of commands that flow directly from the quotation of Pr. 3:34 in v. 6. If God gives the grace to meet His claim on our lives to those who are humble, then we must become humble if we expect to enjoy that grace. James sounds this call for humility in v. 7a and 10: *submit yourselves to God/humble yourselves before the Lord*. The Greek verb in v. 10 – *tapeinoō* – comes from the same root as the Greek word for 'humility' (*tapeinos*) in the Proverbs quotation. This verbal link effectively ties the series of commands to the promise of grace in the quotation of v. 6). And, while not related verbally (the Greek verbs are different), *submit yourselves to God* and *humble yourselves before the Lord* are conceptually similar, forming an *inclusio*. Between these two 'bookends' we find a carefully structured series of commands that spell out some of the aspects and implications of the overall call to 'submit to God.'

Moo: What James writes in vv. 6-10 is strikingly similar to 1 Pe. 5:5-9. Peter also quotes Prov. 3:34 (v. 5b), following it with commands to 'Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's almighty hand, that He may exalt you in due time' (v. 6) and resist the devil (v. 9). These parallels suggest that what James says here may reflect a widespread early Christian call to repentance.

Morgan: True wisdom realizes that nothing short of a radical heart transplant will correct the problem presented in verses 1-6. But a heart transplant is just what God's grace provides. Second Corinthians 5:17 says that a person who is a Christian is a new creation. As such, our behavior must be brought in line with our new nature. The next four verses give the readers a spiritual exercise on how to repent and receive God's grace. The verses present a series of imperative verbs that stress repentance and have their culmination in purifying faith.

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Hughes: In verses 7-10 we find the antidote. This is a tidy unit consisting of a series of terse commands, beginning with the dominant call to submit to God and then giving three couplets of matching commands, and finally issuing a summary command.

MacArthur: These four important verses contain ten commands, all given in the form of Greek aorist imperative verbs. Together, they form one of the clearest calls to salvation in all of Scripture. Unfortunately, many commentators have assumed that this passage refers to Christians and is a call for them to turn away from worldliness back to faithfulness to God. Consequently, this great invitation is often missed.

1. Submit Yourselves to God (4:7a)

⁷*Submit yourselves therefore to God.*

Moo: To *submit* to God means to place ourselves under His lordship, and therefore to commit ourselves to obey Him in all things. The Greek verb (*hypotassō*) means to ‘put in order under,’ and suggests the existence of a hierarchy of authority – such as God institutes in human government (Rom. 13:1, 5; 1 Pe. 2:13) and in marriage (Eph. 5:21; Col. 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Pe. 3:1, 5). The essence of unbelief is failure to ‘submit’ to God’s law (Rom. 8:7) and His righteousness (Rom. 10:3)... Christians, James suggests, are even now to recognize God’s lordship and to place ourselves in glad submission under His wise rule.

Morgan: Repentance begins with the command to ‘submit’ to God. *Hypotassō* (lit. ‘to stand under’) is the opposite of ‘resist’ in the previous verse... Submission to God means that we voluntarily align ourselves on the outside *and* the inside with God and His Word.

MacArthur: The first of the ten commands is from *hypotassō* (‘submit’), which was primarily a military term meaning literally ‘to rank under.’ The passive form indicates the submission is to be voluntary.... No one can be saved without submitting himself to God, willingly coming under His sovereign authority as Lord, to follow His will no matter what.

Dorani: First, James says, ‘Submit yourselves therefore to God.’ ... Before we dedicate ourselves to humanity, James says we should bend or submit ourselves to God. ‘Submit’ sounds very passive in English, but the Greek is more active. The Greek word *hypotassō*, is actually a compound term. The two elements mean ‘arrange’ and ‘under.’ To submit, in Scripture, is not to sit back and wait for God to issue orders. Submission certainly includes obedience to commands, but we also submit when we arrange our lives under God’s general direction... Obedience is certainly one element of submission. To submit is to recognize the lordship and authority of another... Submission requires subordinates to bend their will to the will of their superior... The test of loyalty and submission to a superior comes only when his or her will crosses ours. So it is with God. We *obey* whenever we do His will. We *submit* when we obey a command that seems hard or strange. Such submission signifies that we have humbled ourselves before the Lord.

Hughes: James’s opening command grates like fingernails across the chalkboard of contemporary culture... Today people flood to classes on assertiveness and pay big money to learn the techniques of dominance. But can you imagine anyone attending a class on submissiveness? ... None of us came to Christ unbowed. Many of us had the fear we couldn’t get low enough. That was my experience. I was ignorantly afraid He wouldn’t take me, but He did. James is calling us back to this initial submissiveness. It is to be our everyday experience.

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2. Resist the Devil, Draw Near to God (4:7b-8a)

Hughes: James launches into the first of his coupled commands by stating the negative and positive sides of a mutual call. The *negative* expression is, ‘Resist the devil and he will flee from you’ (v. 7b). The *positive* side is, ‘Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you’ (v. 8a).

Moo: The commands in the first couplet – *resist the devil* and *draw near to God* – unpack the significance of ‘submitting’ to God.

a) Resist the Devil (4:7b)

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

(1) Resist (4:7b)

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Morgan: The next command is to actively resist the adversary. ‘Resist is from *anthistēmi*, ‘to oppose, withstand, set oneself against.’ ... Just as God sets Himself in battle array against the arrogant, so we must do the same in our fight against the devil.

MacArthur: Virtually by definition, to submit to God, your new Lord, is to ‘resist the devil,’ your old lord. ‘Resist’ translates *anthisētmi*, which means literally ‘to stand against,’ ‘to oppose.’ There is no middle ground, no neutrality. As James has just made clear, ‘friendship with the world [Satan’s domain] is hostility toward God.

Hughes: ‘Resist’ is a military metaphor that means to *stand against*, as in combat. The martial language suggests the parallel language of Ephesians 6 where we are told how to prepare to resist the devil. The primary element is an understanding of the enemy, which Paul memorably gives us in Ephesians 6:12.

Moo: Placing ourselves under God’s authority means, negatively, that we firmly refuse to bow to the devil’s authority. The verb translated ‘resist’ means ‘to stand against,’ and can also be translated ‘oppose’ or ‘withstand’ (see, e.g., Acts 6:10; Rom. 9:19; Eph. 6:13).

Dorani: The next words...begin to explain how we submit to God. James links submission to God with resistance to the devil. That is, to submit to God’s authority is to resist the devil’s authority. To submit to God is to order our lives *under* His authority. To resist the devil means we oppose, we fight back, we take a stand against the devil’s authority. To oppose Satan in this setting means to resist temptations especially to fight each other or covet (4:1-2).

(2) The Devil (4:7b)

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Morgan: ‘The devil’ is *diabolos*, the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew *haś-sātān*. Both mean ‘the adversary, the accuser, the slanderer.’ ... He is a living, personal being who has a mind, will, and emotions. Furthermore, he is *not* omniscient nor omnipotent nor omnipresent, but can only do what God allows him to do. He also has numberless minions called demons who do his bidding constantly throughout the earth. He is the embodiment of all that resists God, and he is at enmity with God.

Moo: The word ‘devil’ translates Gk. *Diabolos*, which is used in the Septuagint to translate *śtn*, the Hebrew root that gives us the title ‘Satan.’ The two titles are thus identical in meaning (cp.

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Rev. 20:2), both suggesting that one of the devil’s primary purposes is ‘to separate God and man.’

MacArthur: *Diabolos* (‘devil’) means slanderer, or accuser, one of the most common titles of Satan in Scripture. Anyone who does not belong to Christ is a child of the devil (Jn. 8:44), and ‘the one who practices sin is of the devil’ (1 Jn. 3:8).

(3) And He Will Flee from You (4:7b)

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Morgan: James promises that if we will take a stand against the devil, he will ‘flee’ (*pheugō*) from us. The word for ‘flee’ gives us our word ‘fugitive.’ We can send Satan on the run if we will deny him access to our heart and resist him. Jesus modeled this for us in the temptation experience on the mountain in Matthew 4. Using the Word of God, Jesus stood firm against him and he had to flee.

Moo: When we resist the devil’s purposes, he will, James promises, *flee from you*. Whatever power Satan may have, the Christian can be absolutely certain that he has been given the ability to overcome that power.

MacArthur: Just as the devil left Jesus after the temptation in the wilderness (Mt. 4:11), he will also ‘flee’ from all those who resist him. Here is a pledge that the devil can be defeated, as powerful as he is.

b) Draw Near to God (4:8a)

⁸*Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*

Moo: Parallel to the negative command plus promise in v. 7b is the positive command plus promise in v. 8a.... The verb ‘come near’ (Gk. *engizō*) often refers to approaching God in worship in the OT (e.g., Lev. 21:3, 21; Is. 29:13; 58:2; 65:5; Ez. 40:46; etc.) and has this meaning once also in the NT (Heb. 7:19). But a call to draw near to God in worship does not fit this context well, since James goes on to use the same verb of God’s drawing near to us. So, he is probably using the verb much as it is used in Hosea 12:6: ‘But you must return to your God; maintain love and just and wait for [LXX *engize*, ‘come near’] your God always.’ ... James is urging that we repent of our sins and seek God as an important aspect of his overall call to ‘submit’ ourselves to God (v. 7). The promise that God will come near to those who come near to Him does not, of course, apply to the salvation of unbelievers but to the restoration to fellowship of Christians. Like the father of the prodigal son, God stands always ready to welcome back His children who turn from their sinful ways.

Morgan: This verse emphasizes the reciprocal nature of our relationship with the Father. When we take a step toward God (*eggisate*, ‘to come near’) we find that He already has taken a step toward us. He desires our fellowship and He desires that we love Him from a willing heart.... The place of safety for the Christian is at the throne of grace, and when we draw close to God we find His forgiveness, grace, and strength.

Dorani: When we hear, ‘Come near to God,’ we might think of public worship or private prayers. ‘Come near’ is sometimes the language of worship (Lev. 21:3; Is. 29:13; Heb. 7:19), but James has not been discussing worship. Therefore, ‘come near’ could mean returning to God

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in covenant renewal after straying. For example, God speaks through Malachi, saying, ‘Return to me, and I will return to you’ (Mal. 3:7; cp. Zech. 1:2-3; Hos. 12:6).... But ‘come near’ and ‘draw near’ mean more than ‘repent.’ We come near to God to worship Him, to serve Him, to meet Him, to seek help, and to gain assurance, as well as to repent. It is better, therefore, to conclude that James is offering a far-reaching promise, a promise that other gods do not make. When we draw near to God, He also draws near to us.

MacArthur: The third command is to ‘draw near’ in intimate fellowship and communion with the living, eternal, almighty God. Salvation involves submitting to God as Lord and Savior, but also brings the desire for a true relationship with Him.

Hughes: There is only one view more welcome than the backside of the devil—and that is the face of God.... As His children and *in His Son*, we are near. But there is a *nearer nearness* available to all: ‘Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.’ If you will take that step, a new nearness to God will be yours, and with it buoying tides of grace.

3. Cleans Your Hands, Purify Your Hearts (4:8bc)

Hughes: The next couplet of commands is in the last half of verse 8, which gives the external and internal aspects of the same action. The external is, ‘Cleanse your hands, you sinners,’ and the internal is, ‘purify your hearts, you double-minded.’ This is a call to clean up one’s act and inner life.

Moo: At the end of v. 8, James issues two more commands that unpack in more detail the general exhortation to ‘come near to God.’ Together, they call for a radical repentance that embraces the total person. The two commands are formulated in perfect parallelism: imperative verb plus object, climaxed with a pejorative address to the readers.... The strongly negative descriptions of the readers pick up the similar denunciation that opens the paragraph: ‘you adulterous people’ (v. 4).... These blunt addresses gain all the more strength from their contrast with James’s typical address ‘brothers’ or ‘beloved brothers.’ Clearly he sees his readers as both Christian and in need of a wake-up call that will bring home to them the seriousness of their departure from godly attitudes and behavior.

a) *Cleanse (4:8b)*

(1) Cleanse Your Hands (4:8b)

Cleanse your hands, you sinners...

Morgan: This phrase speaks of the outward cleansing of the instruments of sin, referred to as our ‘hands.’ Here the hands stand for the entire outward life of a person.... Such outward sins need a *catharsis* (from the verb ‘cleanse’), a thorough cleansing by God’s grace (v. 6). ‘Cleanse’ also brings to mind the requirement for the ceremonial cleansing of the hands by the priests of the Old Testament as they approached God (see Ex. 30:19-21; Lev. 16:4).

MacArthur: The fourth command in this invitation to salvation is ‘Cleans your hands, you sinners.’ The origin of this idea was in the Jewish ceremonial prescription for priests before they came before the Lord to offer sacrifices in the tabernacle or temple (cp. Ex. 30:18-21; Lev. 16:4).... The command to ‘cleanse your hands’ is...a command to submit (see James 4:7a) to God’s divine catharsis.

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Doriani: If a sinner comes near to the holy God he will naturally want to repent of his sins. James says, 'Wash your hands.' The hands represent actions or deeds (Gen. 3:22; 4:11; Ex. 3:20; Dt. 2:7; Ps. 89:21).

Moo: They must repent of both this external behavior – *wash your hands* – and the internal attitude that leads to such behavior – *purify your hearts*. The imagery of both 'washing' and 'purifying' stems from the OT provisions for priestly purity in ministering the things of the Lord... But both verbs had come to be applied more broadly to ethical purity as well. James also reflects the OT in using 'hands' and 'heart' to denote both deed and disposition.

(2) You Sinners (4:8b)

Cleanse your hands, you sinners...

Morgan: The sharp address, 'you sinners,' is a vocative plural of the noun for sin, *hamartia*. While commonly used of the unsaved, the parallel with 'double-minded' makes it clear that James is applying the term to Christians. Their communion with God depended on a change in their worldly conduct because, as it stood, they were failing to maintain God's standards for His saints.

MacArthur: The fact that this command is specifically addressed to 'sinners' is further evidence that James is speaking of unbelievers, calling them to repentance and a saving relationship with God. Throughout the New Testament, *hamartōlos* ('sinners') is used only of unbelievers. Interpreters who insist that this overall passage (4:7-10) is addressed to believers must therefore hold that the use of the plural of *hamartōlos* in verse 8 is the only exception. But to make such a claim, especially for such a significant and commonly used word, is not justifiable without compelling evidence in context. Such compelling evidence simply does not exist.

b) Purify (4:8c)

(1) Purify Your Hearts (4:8c)

...and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Morgan: 'Purify your hearts' (*ēagnisate kardias*) again employs familiar Jewish ceremonial language (Jn. 11:55). The same idea is found in 1 Peter 1:22 and 1 John 3:3, where a purification or sanctification of the heart is called for. As in 1:26 and 3:14, James uses the heart to speak of the whole inner life.

MacArthur: In this Hebraic parallelism, 'purify your heart' corresponds to 'cleanse your hands,' and 'you double-minded' corresponds to 'you sinners,' the second phrases adding a more specific dimension. Like David, James associates the outward sins of the hands with the inner sins of the heart (cp. Ps. 24:3-4; 51:10).

Doriani: Next he says 'Purify your hearts.' The heart represents motives or intentions.

(2) You Double-Minded (4:8c)

...and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Moo: 'Double-souled,' NIV *double-minded* (Gk. *dipsychos*), captures a key motif of the letter as a whole. James uses this word (which, as we noted, may have been coined by him) in 1:8 to depict the person whose faith wavers and vacillates. Its repetition here underscores especially James's accusation that his readers are attempting to be 'friends' with both God and the world at

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the same time (v. 4); a conflict of basic allegiance that our jealous God will simply not tolerate (v. 5).

Morgan: ‘Double-minded’ has the same connotation as 1:8; they were ‘two-souled,’ divided between their commitment to Christ and yet wanting to be friends with the world (cp. Ps. 24:3-4a).

MacArthur: *Dipsuchos* (‘double-minded’) literally means ‘double-souled,’ and is used only by James in the New Testament (see also 1:8). This is the person who lacks integrity, who claims one thing and lives another. This is the hypocrite in the assembly of believers who is commonly confronted in James. Here is further proof that James is speaking of and to unbelievers.... A ‘double-minded’ person... could not possibly be a Christian.

Hughes: James is biting aggressive, because up to now he has been courteously referring to his correspondents as ‘brothers,’ but now insultingly calls them ‘sinners’ and ‘double-minded.’ The latter literally means *two-souled* and describes them as having a double allegiance to God and the world. This is a spiritual impossibility.

Dorani: James censures the ‘double-minded.’ The double-minded lack integrity. They pursue two things at once—service to God and service of self. James has already warned about double-mindedness, saying that the double-minded man asks and gets nothing (1:8). He is unstable. But godly wisdom is pure; it has clarity of purpose. True believers are bent on one thing, to seek and to find the Lord.

4. Repent of Your Sin (4:9)

Hughes: The final challenging couplet is in verse 9: ‘Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.’ Before applying this, it must be said that Christianity is preeminently a religion of joy and that the Bible is a joyous book.... Despite this, some Christians have misinterpreted this verse as calling for a life of gloom.

a) Mourning (4:9a)

⁹*Be wretched and mourn and weep.*

MacArthur: The next three commands are a series of single verbs, without modifiers.

Moo: In v. 9 he turns to the prophets for his imagery. *Grieve, mourn, and wail* are all used by the prophets to denote reactions of those who suffer God’s judgment (e.g., Is. 15:2; Jer. 4:13; Hos. 10:5; Joel 1:9-10; Mic. 2:4). But even more to the point are those places where they use such language to call God’s people to repentance from sin (e.g., Joel 2:12).

(1) Be Wretched (4:9a)

⁹*Be wretched and mourn and weep.*

Morgan: We do not hear much in today’s world about genuine sorrow over sin. But that is what James calls for – a recognition of the shame and disgrace due to their sins.... The verb *talaipōrēsate*, used only here in the New Testament, originally denoted hardship and distressing circumstances, but came later to mean a feeling of misery and wretchedness. Some commentators think that James is commanding a voluntary abstinence from certain comforts and luxuries. Other hold that the imperative is a call to ascetic practices such as prayer and fasting in sackcloth to induce this feeling. But James knew that such activities were no substitute for inner

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mourning and repentance. We first have to acknowledge our heart condition before we can repent of it, and the writer demands deep, penitent sorrow for his people's spiritual state.

MacArthur: The first is *talaipōreō* ('be miserable'), which is used only here in the New Testament, although noun and adjective forms are used elsewhere (see Rom. 3:16; 7:24; James 5:1; Rev. 3:17). It carries the idea of being broken and feeling wretched because of one's circumstances—in this case, that of being sinful, lost, and separated from God.... The misery James is speaking of here has nothing to do with being sad about bad circumstances in life and wanting God to help you have better ones. Nor does it relate to religious asceticism, or extreme self-denial and sacrifice that is supposed to make a person humble and more worthy in God's sight.... This misery has to do with the brokenness over one's sin and violation of God's holy law and the fear of judgment.

Dorani: The desire for a pure heart leads logically to sorrow for sin. When sin is manifest, the righteous grieve. The Old Testament prophets said those who faced God's judgment would grieve, mourn, and wail *before* the judgment, as they returned to God (Joel 2:1, 12-14).

Hughes: While gloom is not a Christian characteristic, mourning over our sin is. 'Be wretched' describes the grief one ought to experience when he falls to sin. 'Be devastated' is the perfect expression of what 'wretched' means.

(2) And Mourn and Weep (4:9a)

⁹Be wretched and mourn and weep.

Morgan: 'Mourn' (*pentēsate*) is the same word used by Jesus in Matthew 5:4. It is a call to the godly sorrow Paul spoke of in 2 Corinthians 7:10. 'Weep translates the familiar verb *klaiō*, 'to cry out.' The New Testament joins the two words together often (e.g., Mk. 16:10; Lk. 6:25). James is certainly not calling for an ostentatious show of emotions; rather, a deep grief that cannot be concealed is what he has in mind.

MacArthur: Along with becoming miserable, the contrite sinner is to 'mourn' over his sin. The idea is that of deep grief and remorse, a complete despair that laments over sin the way someone mourns the death of a family member or close friend. To 'weep' is the outward manifestation of the previously mentioned misery and sorrow.

Hughes: 'Mourn' expresses inner grief, and 'weep' refers to a funeral lament.

b) *Laughter (4:9b)*

Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.

Morgan: Genuine penitent believers display a noticeable contrast from their previous behavior. Raucous and gleeful partying turns to repentant, quiet introspection.... 'Turn' is a third-person imperative; literally, 'let it be turned.' The command is from *metatrepein*, which means 'to turn into' and is found only here in the New Testament. 'Laughter' (from *gelōs*) may suggest two ideas. First, the 'joyful' and 'festive' outlook of these sinners and double-minded people is quite out of order because, for them, there is no valid reason to laugh. Second, laughter sometimes reflected the attitude of a fool in the Old Testament (e.g., Pr. 10:33; Eccl. 7:6). When the enormity of sin crashes down on a life, a reversal from superficial gaiety and levity ensues. James is not suggesting that laughter is sinful. Certainly, there is joy and gladness when we are rightly related to God through Christ (cp. Ps. 126:2).... But true joy can never come until genuine repentance and cleansing are experienced.

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Moo: ‘Laughter’ is often the mark of the ‘fool’ in the OT and Jewish literature, the person who scorns the idea of right living and blithely goes along in a life of indolence and pleasure (see, e.g., Pr. 10:23; Eccl. 7:6)... Jesus reflected this tradition when He said, ‘Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep’ (Lk. 6:25b). A carefree, ‘devil-may-care- attitude is typical of those who are ‘friends with the world.’ They live the hedonist philosophy ‘eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die,’ a worldview that ignores the terrifying reality of God’s judgment. But even the committed Christian can slip into a casual attitude toward sin, perhaps presuming too much on God’s forgiving and merciful nature. James’s words in this passage directly counter any such attitude. He wants us to see sin for what it is – a serious breach in our relationship with a loving, heavenly father, a breach that, if not healed, can lead to both temporal and spiritual disaster. James’s insistence that we turn our ‘joy into gloom’ might sound strange in light of Paul’s injunction to ‘rejoice in the Lord always’ (Phi, 4:4). But the joy Paul speaks about is the joy that comes when we realize that our sins are forgiven in Christ; the joy James warns about is the fleeting and superficial joy that comes when we indulge in sin. True Christian joy can never be ours if we ignore or tolerate sin; it comes only when we have squarely faced the reality of our sin, brought it before the Lord in repentance and humility, and experienced the cleansing work of the Spirit.

MacArthur: The ninth command, like the fourth and fifth (4:8b-c), is in the form of a Hebraic couplet, expressing the same basic truth in two different but parallel forms. James is not condemning legitimate ‘laughter’ or ‘joy’ but rather the flippant, trivial, worldly, self-centered, sensual kinds that unbelievers revel in, despite, and often because of, their sinful pleasures.

Dorani: Like Jesus, James says we can laugh now, at sin, and mourn later, over judgment. Or we can mourn now, over sin, and laugh later, at God’s grace (Lk. 6:25). All too often, the world laughs about the wrong things. There is fleeting joy for those who indulge in sin and fleeting sorrow for those who break with it, but it is far better to mourn now for a season and rejoice forever.

Hughes: ‘Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom’ is a scathing denunciation of Christians who are so insensitive and superficial that they are laughing when they ought to be weeping! Some laughter indicates a sickness of soul that only tears can cure. Have we wept over our sins?

5. Humble Yourselves Before the Lord (4:10)

¹⁰*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*

Morgan: The verb ‘humble’ is an imperative of *tapeinoiō* and is in the Greek tense that calls for a once-for-all action.... First Peter 5:6 has this same form and the same promise of exaltation. ‘In the sight of’ translates the Greek preposition *enōpion* and suggests the thought of being under the eye of the Lord.... Jesus juxtaposed the principles of humility and exaltation on several occasions: Mt. 23:12; Lk. 14:11; 18:14. The way to true exaltation always passes through the valley of humility. Jewish readers of this epistle would be reminded of this same truth from Job 5:11; Ps. 113:7-8; and Ez. 21:25. The Lord Himself will ‘exalt’ us. The verb is from *hupsos*, meaning ‘height.’ He will give us forgiveness and joy in our walk with Him. He will lift us up to levels of fellowship and service we never thought possible. There is a world of difference between the person who lifts himself up and the one whom the Lord lifts up. We must make sure that we are the latter.

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Moo: The final command in this paragraph, *humble yourselves before the Lord*, returns to the note on which the commands begin: *submit yourselves to God*. It also brings us back to the quotation from Proverbs 3:34 that serves as the springboard for the series of commands. If God gives grace ‘to the humble,’ then humbling ourselves before God is obviously the way to experience that grace. To ‘humble ourselves before the Lord’ means to recognize our own spiritual poverty, to acknowledge consequently our desperate need of God’s help, and to submit to His commanding will for our lives.... We gain spiritual vitality and victory not through our own strength or effort but through giving ourselves completely to the Lord. When we try to ‘exalt ourselves’ by relying on our own abilities, status, or money, we meet with inevitable failure and even condemnation – God humbles us. James makes this same basic point earlier in his letter when he encourages the ‘humble’ brother to boast in his ‘exaltation’ and the rich brother to boast in his ‘humiliation’ (1:9-10).

MacArthur: Humility is actually the starting point and summary of salvation as far as the human response is concerned.... *Tapeinoō* (‘humble yourselves’) means literally to make low. Here it means to make oneself low, not in the self-put-downs that many people use in order to induce others to build them up, but in a genuine realization of completely unworthiness and lostness because of sin (cp. Is. 6:5).... God has always honored those who are spiritually ‘humble.’ ... God gives His ‘greater grace’ (James 4:6) to those who come into ‘the presence of the Lord’ in repentance and humility. ‘He will exalt’ them lavishly.

Doriani: James does not say, ‘The Lord will humble you’; he says, ‘Humble yourselves before the Lord.’ Therefore, we do not wait for God or for circumstances to humble us. It is our duty to humble ourselves. James does not specify how we do this, but he does drop a hint in the phrase ‘before the Lord.’ If we remember that all we do is ‘before the Lord,’ if His holiness is our standard, it is easier to humble ourselves. But if we compare ourselves to others, it is far easier to avoid humility.... When we compare ourselves to others, we can always find someone who is worse. But if we compare ourselves to the Lord, who is the absolute standard the excuse disappears and we are more likely to humble ourselves.

Hughes: We are not to wait passively for this to somehow happen. We are not to wait for someone else to humble us, nor should we wait for the vicissitudes of life to do it. Rather, self-humbling is *our* Christian duty. We must take inventory of our sinfulness and weakness, then bow in total submission to God, yielding our total being, our dreams, our future, our *everything* to him. It is then that He will pour on the grace—grace upon grace—grace heaped upon grace—‘and He will exalt you.’

6. Summary

Doriani: If we humble ourselves, if we admit that we sin, and that we are sinful, and that we cannot reform ourselves, then, James promises, the Lord will lift us up. This is the gospel according to James. James does not mention the atonement of Christ, the cross of Christ, or the resurrection of Christ. He states the gospel his own way, a way deeply influenced by the teachings of Jesus. James says there is an antithesis, a choice between two ways of life; a way of selfish ambition and a way of purity and peace (3:13-18). We can be a friend of God or a friend of the world (4:4). We can be proud or humble and repentant. Jesus says, ‘Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted’ (Lk. 14:11; 18:14). James says, ‘Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.’ When we grieve over

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our sins and turn to Him in faith, He will extend His redeeming grace. When we come to God in repentance and humility, He will forgive us and lift us up.

Morgan: Notice that the steps to true repentance end just where they began, with a call to humility. Conflict in the fellowship arises when the members seek to have their own selfish ways. Humble repentance is rare, but it is a cure for the woes of self-serving, egocentric desires.

For next time: Read James 4:11-17.