

Carrot on a Stick

Satisfied! -Part One

James 4:1-3

I have read one historical account of a naval skirmish between the French and English in the early 1700's. An English admiral whose ship lay off the coast of France was awaiting his orders. While anchored he didn't want his men growing restless with inactivity and so he ordered his men to practice firing their canon at a nearby French castle.

In typical French fashion, the castle was adorned around the top with statues of patron saints. So for several hours, these men spent their hours in the harbor firing one canon ball after another at the ornate statues of these patron saints on top of the castle walls.

Suddenly, they were called to war and the orders came so suddenly they were unable to refurbish the ship. They had to set sail immediately.

This ship ended up being defeated and captured not because they were out-manned or out-maneuvered, but because they ran out of ammunition. They had spent so much of it shooting at the saints.

One of the greatest problems the church faces is not the world outside the church, but the world inside the church; believer against believer and brother against brother firing away at the saints.

Paul asked the Corinthian church, “**For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?**” (1 Corinthians 3:3)

The Galatian church was likewise allowing bitter wrangling among them, and Paul said that they were in danger of consuming one another (Galatians 5:15).

Paul challenged the church in Ephesus to work hard at developing spiritual unity and then in his letter to the Philippians Paul even named two women in the church at Philippi who couldn't get along—Euodia and Synteche.

J. Vernon McGee renamed Euodia and Synteche, Odious and Soon-touchy (Ephesians 4:1-16; Philippians 4:1-3)

The problems of strife and jealousy go all the way back to a family that's been exiled from the Garden of Eden.

In this first family Cain grew jealous of Abel until his jealousy and bitter rivalry bore the fruit of murder.

You would never imagine that Cain would ever come to church—much less join it.

Yet, the most shocking words from the lips of James are about to be heard in the assembly about the assembly.

James chapter 4 opens with a stunning, shocking disclosure; *verse 1. What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your bodies/members? 2. You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. 3. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.*

After reading that your first thought is surely James isn't talking about Christians. There's no way!

Quarrels and conflicts?! The word quarrels refers to a long state of hostility; conflicts refers to specific outbursts of hostility.¹

I know of one popular author and commentator who insisted that James has to be writing about unbelievers. He simply ignored the fact that James was writing to a body of believers.

If you go back a page to *chapter 3 and verse 13* James asks *who among you is wise and understanding*. Then here in *chapter 4 and verse 1* James refers to quarrels and conflicts *among you*—same phrase.

The clincher is down in *verse 11* where he specifically identified his audience as *brethren*. That designation is always reserved for believers. James is writing the church at large!

Like Paul's words to the church at Corinth in his second letter where he wrote, "I am afraid that perhaps when I come . . . there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, disturbances . . ."

Is he talking about a church service or a hockey game? This past week I turned on a hockey game, and I couldn't believe it. It was a bitter rivalry out on the ice and near the end of the game the fights began to break out; one fight after another. They couldn't go 15 seconds without another fight. The game just wouldn't end. I've never seen this happen before, but even the goalies skated out to center ice, took off their masks, dropped their gloves, and went at it.

The fans were going berserk. You expect that out on the ice but not in the church.

Could there be such bitter rivalries among believers? Could there be such jealousy and selfishness and envy and hostility and lustful desires that the church could digress and lives be destroyed?

The answer according to James is absolutely! But James wants to go behind the answer and find out what started this fiasco.

Like my 5th grade teacher who unfortunately didn't see that kid throw that football at me while we waited in line to go in after break, and that football hit me square on the nose. The teacher didn't see that. All he saw were that kid and me rolling around in the dirt, fighting it out. We looked like those two goalies.

Once the teacher pulled us apart he asked one question, "Okay, young men, I wanna know who started it?" He threw the football at me and hit me in the nose. Yea, but Davey came after me and threw the first punch.

We both spent the rest of the afternoon in the Principal's office negotiating a peace treaty.

Both of us were guilty of fighting, but the one who started it would be considered the guiltier of the two since the other person may have only been involved for the sake of self-defense. That's exactly what James wants to find out too.

Would you notice the first four words in *verse 1—What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?*

In other words, who started it? Let's get to the bottom of it!

What James will do in these next few verses is show us three internal sources of external conflict.

And here's the bad news: you got trouble in the church? The trouble begins with you!

The first source of conflict can simply be called:

1. Shameful Desires

Notice the middle part of *verse 1. Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members*—that is, in your body?

Is not the source your pleasures?

The word, pleasures, is *hedonai* (ἡδοναί) from which we get our word, hedonist or hedonism.ⁱⁱ

Hedonism was a moral perspective established in Greece 400 years before the birth of Christ by a philosopher named Aristippus the Cyrene. He taught that whatever pleasure seems natural to a person constitutes good – and should be sought after.ⁱⁱⁱ

He would be a best seller today. He may have formalized it, but he didn't invent it. Hedonism happens to be the most popular philosophy of life on the planet. Whatever feels good is. Whatever's right for you is.

How can it be wrong when it feels so right . . . somebody ought to write a song about that.

Hedonism is the belief that pleasure is the chief good in life.^{iv} If it's pleasing or exciting or fun or pleasurable then it must be good.

The interesting thing is that whenever this word appears in the New Testament it always appears in a sinful or shameful context.

- In *Luke 8:14*, he describes people who walk away from the demands of discipleship as people who are "*choked by life's pleasures.*"
- In Titus, Paul refers to people "*enslaved by various kinds of lusts and pleasures.*" (*Titus 3:3*)
- Peter referred to false teachers who *count it a pleasure to revel in their sin* (*2 Peter 3:13*).
- The Apostle Paul described a hedonist in the clearest of terms when he wrote that they are, "*lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers . . . treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.* (*2 Timothy 3:2-4*)

Now don't misunderstand; James is not suggesting that pleasure itself is wrong. You can find pleasure in playing with your children or grandchildren; taking a walk; watching a sunrise or sunset; enjoying the pleasure of your spouse sitting on your porch during a rainfall; reading a book; fishing on a quiet morning.

I was sent a link this past week to a live camera located high in a pine tree inside the Norfolk Botanical Gardens. The camera is located about 10 feet above the nest of a female bald eagle that is nesting on her three eggs.

What a pleasure to watch and just about every day I catch a minute or two. I'm looking forward to the pleasure of seeing those eaglets once they hatch and watching as that female flies in to feed them some unfortunate mouse which I would love the pleasure of donating.

All pleasures and desires aren't evil.

- *Psalm 73:25 – Whom have I in heaven but Thee and there is nothing upon earth I desire beside Thee.*
- *Desire earnestly spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14:1)*
- *I desire to depart and be with Christ (Philippians 1:23)*
- *If any man aspires to the office of elder, it is a fine work he desires. (1 Timothy 3:1)*

But this word chosen by James—*hedonai*—is the dark side of desire. These are the shameful desires of forbidden pleasure and we can blame it all on the devil, right?

Look again at *verse 1- What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you-is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members—that is, in your own body?*

We give the devil way too much credit for our sin. James informs us that we've actually got a war going on internally. Pleasure is waging war!

Immoral pleasures, evil desires, self-centered plans, and wicked thoughts are at war with our spirit to see who gains control.

The words translated “wage war” comes from a Greek word that can literally be translated, an armed camp.^v

Camping within your fallen flesh, you happen to have an army of desires that are constantly plotting, maneuvering, and attacking, so that they can gain control of your life.

One Greek Scholar put it this way, “This word refers to a military expedition where the passions of the flesh are described as constantly fighting to have their way, to be victorious over the spirit, over the new nature which Jesus Christ has given us.”^{vi}

There's a war going on!

The Apostle Peter used the same word James uses here when he warned the believers, “*Beloved, I urge you as aliens—that is, as strangers in this world to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul (1 Peter 2:11).*”

Listen, one of the worst things you can tell someone is that when they come to Christ everything settles down.

Oh no . . . the real battle begins! The shocking truth is this—you are at war with *yourself*. Shameful desires are constantly trying to win the day.

That's not all – James goes on to give us the second source of conflict.

2. Sinful Attitudes

He writes in *verse 2, you lust and do not have; so you commit murder.*

Now that sounds like more than a bad attitude. It could be. James could be referring to actual murder to fulfill some lust. It happens every day and Christians aren't immune to the temptation.

I know of one believer who had an affair with a woman while her husband was stationed in the Middle East. Contrary to their plans, she became pregnant. Some neighbors had seen them together and the word would get out. This man had a close friend in the military who owed him a favor . . . he was actually serving with this woman's husband in the same platoon. The plan they put together worked. The next time they got in a fire fight, he made sure his buddy didn't get the support he needed, and he was killed. It would all come out later when they confessed to it all. The man actually ended up marrying his neighbor—the widow. Her name was Bathsheba, and his name was David.

Yes . . . it's possible for believers to lust and plot and kill. The Greek word for “*kill*” can also have the wider meaning of – to destroy.^{vii}

One author wrote that whenever any strong, sinful lust is not gratified or when the lusting person cannot achieve his desired goal—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.^{viii}

Shameful desires and sinful attitudes are going to destroy something or someone!

James goes on further in *verse 2, You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel.*

Would you notice that the external fighting and quarreling is a result of internal envy and frustration. *You are envious and cannot obtain so you fight and quarrel.*

You are envious and can't quite reach their objective. Like a mule chasing a carrot on a stick. They can't achieve the object of their great desire. So I think I'll kick the farmer or run away.

The truth is that our desires and passions [and attitudes] are like an armed camp within us, ready at a moment's notice to declare war against anyone who stands in the way of some personal gratification on which we have set our hearts.^{ix}

James is saying “watch out!” Our world has captured the essence of our fallen condition and the propensity we have to want what we don't have.

The next time you go into a grocery store and get up to the checkout lane I want you to make a couple of observations.

To your left will be a magazine rack where most of the articles are about some magic diet; which makes you feel guilty enough to pick one up since you're standing there with your milk, eggs, Moose Tracks and chocolate covered almonds. They're good for your heart!

To your right there is that candy rack with rows and rows of candy. Have you ever noticed that the shelves go all the way down to the floor. Those lower shelves are not there for us. We can't bend down that far without risking permanent damage. That candy rack is perfect for children!

In fact, the top row is just low enough for a two year old to reach out from their seat in the cart and grab a handful.

It's ingenious, and our fallen nature is revealed once again at Harris Teeter.

Notice the last phrase of *verse 2 – You do not have because you do not ask.*

In other words, you won't ask someone for whatever it is they have that you want because you know it's inappropriate and you certainly won't ask

God for it, because you know He knows it's inappropriate.

I want you to notice how James is making it clear that we understand that this kind of life—the giving in to wrong desires and bad attitudes—is a life of guaranteed frustration.

Notice verse 2 again – you lust and do not have; you are envious and cannot obtain; you do not have because you do not ask.

Listen, these people described here desire and are never satisfied. They long for something they cannot have. They lust for something they should not have and it only leads to more craving and more coveting.

James uses the present tense here for their inward attitude of coveting—this is an ongoing unrelenting desires and thoughts and plans and feelings that only lead to more desiring and planning and feeling without every finding satisfaction.

One author spelled it out—satisfaction through self-gratification is an every eluding goal.

C.S. Lewis wrote this of temptations and forbidden desires, whatever they may be . . . “[There will be] an ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure.^x

What James is actually giving us, as a categorical objective to this chapter, is the only way in life to be satisfied.

He's actually starting this paragraph with how to make sure you are never satisfied in life—here's how.

- Feed your shameful desires;
 - Fantasize over forbidden fruit
 - Compartmentalize immoral thoughts and practices
- Defend your sinful attitudes;
 - Inwardly condemn those around you while at the same time coveting what they have and who they are and how they look
 - Rejoice internally over the losses of others in the assembly

That's for starters . . . bound up in the first few lines of James chapter four.

Shameful desires . . . sinful attitudes . . . there's one more internal source of conflict.

3. Selfish motives

James writes in *verse 3, you ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.*

In other words, you do indeed get around to praying for certain things you know aren't overtly sinful, but your motives are selfish and all you really want is your own pleasures, your own comfort, your own way, your own success, your own path.

Like the man who prayed,

Lord, bless only me—
That's as far as I can see.^{xi}

The verb James uses for asking in prayer is *aitew* (αἰτέω) which carries the idea of pleading and begging and imploring.^{xii}

James used the same verb in *chapter 1 and verse 5* where he encouraged us to beg God for wisdom. It wasn't just a slight desire; it was a deep desire.

Here in *chapter 4*, the verb is in the middle voice which means, "to beg for your own benefit . . . to ask for *personal interests*."^{xiii}

These believers are not accused by James of praying for sinful things. They are accused because their basic purpose in making their requests is to further their personal lives. In other words, it's possible to ask for good things with self-centered motives.^{xiv}

James pulls off the mask when he says, at the end of *verse 3 -you just want to spend it on yourself.*

Let's get real about our prayer. We want the good life now. We want to be comfortable now, and maybe prayer is the magic key.

When John Ward, a member of the British Parliament, died, a prayer was found among his papers that was rather embarrassing to his estate.

"O Lord, thou knowest that I have mine estates in the City of London, and likewise that I have lately purchased an estate in the county of Essex. I beseech thee to preserve the two counties from fire and earthquake; and as I have a mortgage in Hertfordshier, I beg of thee likewise to have an eye of compassion on that county; as for the rest of the counties, thou mayest deal with them as thou art pleased."

The word James uses for *spend* is the same verb found in the story of the prodigal son who spent his inheritance on himself.

Yes, we're going to the Father . . . yes we're asking for His blessing, but in our heart of hearts, we just want our lives to be better, richer, healthier and more comfortable.

By the way, this text is *the* biblical indictment on the prosperity gospel of our generation. At the heart of it, God is treated as nothing more than a vending machine in the sky.^{xv}

Put in your 25 cents of prayer and your nickel of faith and another nickel of claiming the power in Jesus name and here comes your blessing—glory hallelujah!

If it doesn't come down the vending machine, you didn't get the incantation right, or you should have put in more money to prime the pump.

One commentator from a past generation wrote, "If prayer is no more than a formula (saying the right words, believe hard enough, confess; it will happen) then Christians are back to a type of magic; they can manipulate God or impose their will on God for he has to answer. In contrast, New Testament prayer grows out of a trusting relationship with a Father whose will is supreme."^{xvi}

You want an unsatisfied life? Live it on the basis of shameful desires and sinful attitudes and selfish motives.

It will be a life of little more than chasing a carrot on a stick.

Do you want to be satisfied? James will tell us how in this paragraph, but first he tells us how we will only disappoint ourselves and others when we live only for ourselves—our shameful pleasures, our sinful attitudes, and our selfish motives.

Maybe you're thinking . . . I've got so much growing up to do. Will it ever happen?

If you read ahead, James will encourage us all to confess quickly to follow God with fresh vigor and to be patient. Be patient . . . God is at work in your life.

Maybe you feel like my son did who this month—21 years ago—turned the ripe old age of four.

I went up to the twins room that morning, and one of my boys was awake and to my surprise he was teary eyed. I said, "Hey buddy, what's the problem?" He wiped the tears from his eyes and said, "Today's my birthday." It's his birthday and he's crying . . . did he learn that from his mother? Son, you need to save those tears for when you hit like forty or fifty.

I actually said, “Well, yea, it’s your birthday, but aren’t you happy about that? You’re four years old now. How great is that?”

Now I have no idea where he got this from, but he said to me in all sincerity, “But I thought when I was four I’d be big.”

Somewhat he thought he was going to wake up and poof find that he’d grown up overnight and skipped Middle School. He was so disappointed.

Don’t be that way too. Some of the greatest saints I’ve ever met, men and women in their 70’s and 80’s, never talked to me about reaching a point where they felt they’d safely made it to spiritual maturity. They talked of the war within, the battlefields of the mind and heart. They told the truth.

In a collection of Puritan prayers penned and prayed by great church leaders of generations ago, you discover the same reality and surrender to Christ.

Here’s one where the aged servant of Christ admitted in his prayer the war within. He prayed:

When Thou wouldst guide me

I control myself.

When Thou wouldst be sovereign

I rule myself.

When I should depend on Thy provision

I supply myself.

When I should submit to Thy providence,

I follow my own will.

When I should honor and trust Thee,

I serve myself.

Lord, it is my chief desire to bring my heart back to Thee.^{xvii}

That’s another way of saying, the war rages on. Get real about it. Get honest with yourself before God and ask Christ to captain your heart, your mind, your will . . . your all.

Anything else will only take you down an unsatisfied path—chasing after another carrot on a stick.

i D. Edmond Hiebert, James (BMH Books, 1992), p. 222

ii Dan G. McCartney, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James (Baker Academic, 2009), p. 207

iii Spiros Zodhiates, The Labor of Love (AMG Publishers, 1981), p. 221

iv R. Kent Hughes, James: A Faith that Works (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 167

v John Phillips, Exploring the Epistle of James (Kregel, 2004), p. 128

vi Zodhiates, p. 221

vii Zodhiates, p. 226

viii John MacArthur, James (Moody Press, 1998), p. 188

ix Phil A. Newton, Expository Sermons in James (South Woods Baptist Church, 2005), p. 83

x Quoted by Hughes, p. 170

xi Zodhiates, p. 232

xii MacArthur, p. 190

xiii Hiebert, p. 226

xiv Ibid, p. 227

xv Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James (Zondervan, 2008), p. 189

xvi Hiebert, p. 226

xvii The Valley of Vision quoted by Charles Swindoll in, Intimacy with the Almighty (Word Publishing, 1996), p. 70