

Week 8: The Cause of Quarrels

The Place of the Passage

In [James 3](#), the author began dealing with the problem of quarreling and backbiting within the church. The immediate issue seems to have been people competing with one another for position within the church ([James 3:1](#)), and they were using their tongues to tear one another down. Having spoken about the tongue's evil and the power of wisdom to counteract it, James turns in [James 4](#) to consider the quarrels themselves. In a brilliant explanation of human nature, fallen as it is, he shows that quarrels are the result of unfulfilled, prideful desires warring within us, and he then exhorts his readers to repent of their pride.

The Big Picture

Fights and quarrels are caused when we desire something and cannot get it. The remedy for that kind of pride is repentance and submission to God.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, [James 4:1–12](#). Then review the listed passages and write your own notes on the following questions. (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible, pages 2396–2397, available online at www.esvbible.org.)

The Cause of Quarrels ([James 4:1–5](#))

In [James 4:1–3](#), the author gives us a profound analysis of human conflict. People have wondered for centuries what causes conflict, and they have given multiple answers to the question: differing philosophies, inaccurate assumptions, differing expectations, differences in culture, differing conflict resolution strategies. James, however, cuts right to the root. He gives an answer that is so self-evidently true that it now seems inescapably obvious to us, something that, once said, can never be denied. What is James's answer? "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?"

In [James 4:2](#), is the author accusing members of the church of actually, physically killing each other? (Hint: read [Matthew 5:21–22](#) before you answer.)

Ponder [James 4:3](#). Is every desire a good desire? How do you tell the difference between a good desire and a bad one?

In [James 4:4–5](#), James makes the point that you cannot be driven by ungodly desires and expect to be in friendship with God. Where else in the Bible is this truth taught?

There is no specific verse of Scripture that says precisely, word for word, what James says in [James 4:5](#). Is James misquoting Scripture? Look at the ESV Study Bible notes on [James 4:5](#) and [James 3:14](#). Which theme of Scripture's teaching is James probably referencing in this verse?

The Nature of Repentance ([James 4:6–10](#))

In [James 4:6](#), what does James say is the antidote to the prideful desires that cause quarrels?

In [James 4:7–10](#), James exhorts believers to do seven things in order to counteract pride in their lives. List those seven exhortations, and explain what James means by each of them.

Who Are You to Judge? ([James 4:11–12](#))

In [James 4:11–12](#), James returns to the main theme of these last few verses—the way some in the Christian community were speaking evil of one another out of jealousy and a selfish ambition for status in the church. “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.” But read the rest of [James 4:11](#). What is the reason James gives for not speaking evil against each other?

To what specific commandment does James point in [James 2:8](#) as summing up or encapsulating the heart of King Jesus’ royal law? How is it a violation of that commandment to speak evil against a brother?

When you know what the law says and deliberately decide not to obey it, but rather to violate it, what are you implicitly saying about that law? (Hint: that it is unworthy of your obedience, etc.) What right do you have to say such things about God’s law? Now, having answered those questions, put James’s point in [James 4:11–12](#) in your own words.

To paraphrase James’s last question in [James 4:12](#), what right do you have to violate the heart of the royal law by judging your brother instead of loving him?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to reflect on the Personal Implications these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

Gospel Glimpses

FRIENDSHIP WITH THE WORLD IS ENMITY WITH GOD. James teaches here that becoming a Christian involves a radical break with sin. A person cannot continue to coddle and entertain his sin and still claim to be a Christian. This is simply a matter of repentance—of turning away from sin and toward God. The power for doing this is the gospel message itself, through which we have been turned from enemies to friends of God. This truth, made real to us by the Holy Spirit, frees us to accept becoming an enemy of the world in various ways. Through the gospel, we have the one friendship that matters.

ONE LAWGIVER AND JUDGE, WHO IS ABLE TO SAVE AND TO DESTROY. James puts the fundamental choice presented in the gospel in stark terms here. All human beings are sinful and therefore liable to condemnation and eternal punishment—that is, to destruction according to God’s exacting justice. In his grace, however, God has determined to save all those who turn from sin and trust his Son, Jesus, to save them from their sin.

Whole-Bible Connections

A JEALOUS GOD. From the very beginning of his dealings with the nation of Israel, God made it clear that he would not tolerate his people worshiping gods other than himself. So in the first of the Ten Commandments he says, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” ([Ex. 20:2–3](#)). For this reason, God repeatedly described himself as “jealous,” even saying in [Exodus](#)

[34:14](#) that his very name is “Jealous.” Ezekiel and Amos, too, draw out the idea of God’s jealousy, comparing him to a husband whose wife has been unfaithful. God is passionate about his people’s faithfulness to him. As James seems to be saying, he has given us life, and he expects our single-minded worship in return.

THE LAW AND DIVINE JUDGMENT. Unlike the other nations of the world, the nation of Israel did not develop its own law. Rather, Israel’s Lawgiver was God himself. In the book of Exodus, God calls Moses to the top of Mount Sinai and gives him the law according to which Israel is to live. Not only so, but it is God and God alone who will judge the world. As he promises in [Joel 3:12](#), “Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations.” It is striking that in the New Testament, both of these roles—Lawgiver and Judge—are assumed by the Son of God. In [Matthew 5](#), Jesus claims for himself the role of Lawgiver, and therefore the right to say what the law really means ([Matt. 5:17–20](#)). Not only so, but it is Jesus who assumes the role of Judge as well: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” ([Matt. 25:31–32](#)).

Theological Soundings

YOUR PASSIONS ARE AT WAR WITHIN YOU. Christians are not exempt from the battle against sin. Even after we experience the new birth and the Lord gives us a new heart, we still battle against our old sinful nature. Paul writes about this struggle in [Galatians 5:16–17](#): “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” As Christians, we are forgiven of our sin and set free from its dominion, but we will need to continue to struggle against it until we are finally with Jesus ([1 John 1:10](#)).

RESIST THE DEVIL. James understands that the devil, or Satan, is a real being, not just a symbol of the world’s evil. This is a reality taught throughout the Bible. Jesus often interacted with malign, personal spiritual beings, and so did the apostles, as the book of Acts shows. Part of our calling as Christians is to resist the devil and his plots in our lives.

Satan: A spiritual being whose name means “accuser.” As the leader of all the demonic forces, he opposes God’s rule and seeks to harm God’s people and accuse them of wrongdoing. His power, however, is confined to the bounds that God has set for him, and one day he will be destroyed along with all his demons ([Matt. 25:41](#); [Rev. 20:10](#)).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of [James 4:1–12](#) for your own life today. Note the personal implications for your walk with the Lord in light of (1) the Gospel Glimpses, (2) the Whole-Bible Connections, (3) the Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings
4. [James 4:1–12](#)

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you engage in this study of James. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and to take note of things to review again in the future.