

Week 11: *James: The World Versus God*

Hook



Main Point: The kingdoms of God and the world are opposing kingdoms.

Imagine you woke up on your 20th birthday to find that someone had deposited \$100 billion into your bank account – no strings attached. What would be the first thing you’d buy? A dream house? A private jet? Unlimited Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups?

Now, fast-forward to today. If you were given that same amount, how would you spend it? Would your priorities be the same, or have they changed? Why do you think your desires and values have changed over time?

Transition: Today we will discuss the shift in motive that takes place in the life of the believer.

RECAP: So far in our study of James, we have learned that James is wisdom literature, applied wisdom that gives practical advice for real everyday situations from a Christ-centered perspective. In chapter 1, James touched on some main ideas – wisdom, trials and temptations, true religion, and being doers of the Word – which he returns to in more detail throughout the letter.

In chapter 2, James started going into more detail on these topics. First, he taught that showing partiality to the rich is a sin because it was not loving the poor as ourselves. He talked about the difference between the law of works-righteousness and the “law of liberty” and why we should choose grace. Then he circled back to the idea that faith without works is dead and used examples from the Old Testament to show us how Abraham and Rahab showed their faith in action. In chapter 3, James went into more detail about how difficult it is to control our tongues and the damage it can cause when we don’t. Then he talked about how godly wisdom is shown through action. In this lesson, we move into chapter 4, where James continues drawing the line between godly

wisdom and worldly wisdom by saying that friendship with the world is enmity with God.

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Book

Main Point: The kingdoms of God and the world are opposing kingdoms.

James 4:1–2 and Galatians 5:13–16 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Unchecked fleshly desires lead to conflict within the church.

Q: What causes people to fight and sin against each other?

Q: How can we not gratify the desires of the flesh?

At the end of chapter 3, James said godly wisdom produces humility rather than selfish ambition, which leads to a community that lifts up one another rather than tearing down one another. In this section, he told them exactly what causes fights rather than unity and peace among the people, which is our sinful desires to get what we want. It's that competitive, rather than cooperative, attitude again. When we live by our fleshly desires, we seek as much pleasure, wealth and stuff for ourselves as possible, even if it means hurting other people. James said the reason there are fights among God's people is because they pursue their fleshly desires instead of Christ. People steal because they want something they don't have. James said the same about murder and fighting (v. 2). All these sins come back to the root of fleshly desire – trying to get what we want.

James used a play on words here that is hard to see in the English but is clear in the original Greek. The words for "fights" and "quarrels" in verses 1 and 2 are both words used for warfare, not just arguments. Also in verse 1, James said our passions are "at war" within us. These fights and quarrels are not just fights; they are battles. This is warfare. The fleshly passions within us aren't just wants. There is spiritual warfare going on between the good our minds and hearts want to do and the evil our flesh desires. As Paul said, "When I want to do right, evil lies close at hand" (Romans 7:14–25).

A battle rages within us, a fight between our flesh and the Spirit. When we give in to those fleshly desires inside us – we steal, we kill, we lie, we cheat – we do whatever it takes to get what we want. Even to people we love, even to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul told the Galatians that those who are in Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Galatians 5:24), yet he still described this war raging within us and how we have to choose daily to walk by the Spirit so we won't give into the desires of the flesh (Galatians 5:16). It is the Spirit who works in us, changes us, and grows His fruit in us, but it doesn't just automatically happen. We can't sit idly by and expect to grow in sanctification. We have a part to play; we must choose to walk by the Spirit.

The word “walk” depicts a daily habitual lifestyle. It’s not something we do only on Sunday mornings. This wasn’t a new concept. Walking in God’s ways is a central theme of the Old Testament, emphasizing obedience to the Law and the pursuit of righteousness. The imagery points not just to a one-time choice to follow God but continuous action, daily walking in His ways. In the Greco-Roman world, philosophers used “walking” to describe the pursuit of wisdom and ethical living. But in the New Testament, it’s walking *by* the Spirit, not just walking *in* God’s ways. Instead of trying our best to follow God’s ways in our own wisdom and power, we put our trust in the Spirit, letting the Spirit guide us and work in and through us.

The way to crucify the flesh isn’t just to try harder not to lie or cheat or steal. It’s to walk by the Spirit. It’s to set our mind on things above. It’s to immerse ourselves in God’s Word, meditate on Scripture, listen for His voice, pray for His wisdom. The more we walk by the Spirit, the more the desires of the flesh will be crucified in us. The more we pursue Jesus, the less we will desire the things of the flesh. The Spirit will grow His fruit in us and our desires will change.

If we want to keep the church community unified, we must pursue walking by the Spirit. If we are all walking by the Spirit, we will be walking in the same direction together, instead of fighting against one another. If there is any fight or conflict in the church, the way through it is to talk it out, pray together, and seek the Spirit’s leading together. The Holy Spirit won’t lead us in different directions; He will bind us together as one body.

Q: Describe times when you have seen conflict in the church. How did you work through it?

Q: How have you seen the Spirit bring people together in unity in a church?

James 4:2–3 and Matthew 7:7–11 [Read]

Talking Point 2: God gives us what we need.

Q: Why do we sometimes not receive what we ask God for?

Q: What kinds of gifts does God give to His children? Who defines what is “good”?

While James was talking about the warfare within us between our fleshly passions and desires and what our God-loving minds and hearts want to do, he also addressed why God may not always give us what we ask Him for in prayer. First he said, “You do not have because you do not ask,” implying that if we want something, all we have to do is ask God. This is what he said about wisdom. All we have to do is ask and God will give it

to us, because God gives godly wisdom to His people, generously and without reproach (1:5).

That is because godly wisdom is always good for us. There is never a situation in which having godly wisdom is a bad thing. So God will always give us wisdom when we ask. And/or He will give us situations that make godly wisdom grow in us. The same applies to every Fruit of the Spirit. The Fruit of the Spirit are good things for us to have; they are never bad for us. If we ask God for patience, He will give us patience and/or circumstances that grow patience in us. If we ask God for faith, He will give us peace and/or circumstances that grow faith in us. As our loving heavenly Father, He delights in giving us good things (Matthew 7:9–11).

But as our heavenly Father, God sometimes says no to our requests. As our heavenly Father, He knows what is best for us. He knows when something is not good for us, and He will not give us things that are not good for us. Just after James said we won't have things if we don't ask, He immediately followed it up by saying that sometimes we ask and don't receive because we ask "wrongly." This doesn't mean we use the wrong language in our prayers when we ask.

The word translated *wrongly* means "evil" or "wicked" or even "sick." When it is used in the New Testament, about 80 percent of the time it's translated "sick" or "diseased." This reflects the theology of the sinful nature of humanity. We don't just do sinful things; we are born into a sin nature inherited from Adam and Eve (Romans 5:12). Our hearts are "desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9). The sickness imagery shows us that our sin is not something we can fix by just making better choices (behavior modification). We must be healed of our sin-sickness.

Asking "wrongly" means asking out of that sinful nature, the fleshly desires. It's not just about having the right motive or attitude or asking in the right way or using the right words when we ask God for things. James was creating a contrast between asking God for wicked things (fleshly desires) and asking for godly things (Fruit of the Spirit), the same contrast Paul wrote about in Galatians 5. God is our loving heavenly Father who only gives us good things – every good gift is from Him (James 1:17). God delights in giving us good gifts, but He will not give us evil things.

This is a huge part of trusting God as our heavenly Father. If God is not giving you what you are asking for in prayer, you have to trust that it is not what is best for you, at least not right now. Sometimes God says a "hard 'NO'" to something because it's a fleshly passion, not a godly thing, as James was describing. But sometimes it's not a bad thing, it's just not the right timing. God's answers are either yes, no, or *not yet*.

Sometimes it can be hard to tell if the thing we are asking for is one of those fleshly desires. We may believe it is a good thing because we misunderstand, we're being manipulated or deceived, or we don't see the full picture as God does. Satan is very good at making evil things enticing, just as he did with Eve and the fruit in the garden of Eden. But we must trust God as our Father. When we ask, the posture of our heart should be saying, "If it's your will," as Jesus did in the garden of Gethsemane. And then we need to trust His answer. We can ask God to reveal His wisdom to us. Is this just a "not yet" or is this thing we're asking for not good? God is the One who defines what is good and what is not. We can trust Him to know what to give us and what not to give.

Q: Describe a time when you asked God for something but didn't receive it and later realized it wouldn't have been good for you.

Q: How can we better discern fleshly desires from what is good?

James 4:4–5 and 1 John 2:15–17 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Friendship with the world is enmity with God.

Q: Why did James and John describe such a sharp division between God's kingdom and the world? Does this seem over the top to you? Why or why not?

Q: What will happen to the things of this world? What about the things of God's kingdom?

It shouldn't surprise us that James described God and the world as two opposing kingdoms. In his letter so far, James has made a sharp divide between the things of this world and the things of God. Paul did the same in Galatians, even using the same language – fleshly passions and desires (Galatians 5:16–24). John did the same, urging Christians not to love the things of this world. This doesn't mean we can't love the good things of the world such as sunsets and coffee. God created the world good. He loves the world and all the people in it. When the apostles referred to the world, they meant the sinful fleshly desires. They meant the evil forces of wickedness (Ephesians 6:10). They meant the "domain of darkness" (Colossians 1:13).

James used language from the Old Testament when he called them "adulterous people." The Old Testament uses a metaphor of marriage to describe God's relationship with Israel. God is the ever-faithful husband and Israel is the adulterous wife. God never fails in His promises to them, but they continue to turn to other "lovers" (gods). Worshipping other gods is like cheating on God, who is our only true love. But Scripture tells us these other "gods" are not gods at all; they are demons (Deuteronomy 32:17).

God is the only true God. Scripture also tells us that Satan is the ruler of this world (John 12:31). When James talked about our loving the world, he was creating the same imagery of cheating on God with Satan and his demons. All over Scripture we see this imagery of two opposing “kingdoms,” the kingdom of light (God) and the kingdom of darkness (Satan). But they are not *equal* opposing kingdoms; God is greater than Satan (1 John 4:4). The prince of this world is just a fallen angel, not a god.

These two kingdoms are on opposite sides of the spiritual battle between good and evil. If you join yourself to the world, you put yourself in opposition to God. It is your choice which side to be on, but you can’t be on both, just as an NFL player can’t play for both the Cowboys and the Texans. If you play for the Texans, you play against the Cowboys. You can’t switch back and forth from quarter to quarter. You can’t have one foot on each side. In the same way, you can’t have one foot in the world and one in the kingdom of God. You must choose a side. Just as God told His people before they entered the Promised Land, His physical kingdom in the Old Testament, “Choose this day whom you will serve,” either Yahweh or the false “gods” of the nations (Joshua 24:15).

To hedge their bets, God’s people had been worshipping other gods in addition to Yahweh. If Yahweh didn’t come through for them, maybe these other gods would give them the good crop, fertility, health or wealth they wanted. But God said they had to choose. The covenant relationship between God and His people is like a marriage; they had to stay faithful to one “husband.” They had to trust that, just as a good husband did in the ancient world, God would provide all they needed; they didn’t have to run to other gods for those things (Hosea 2:5–8). We do the same thing when we say we follow God but show by our actions that we are really putting our trust in the things of the world. We must choose. Will we follow God or the world? Will we walk by the Spirit or the desires of the flesh? We can’t have it both ways.

Q: What “desires of the flesh” do you see most rampant in the world around us? Why might it be tempting to join in following those desires instead of trusting in God?

Q: How does the imagery of two opposing armies help you understand the spiritual warfare that is going on all around us every day?

Q: How differently would your day look if you surrendered every step, decision, and spoken word to the authority of Christ?

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Took

Main Point: The kingdoms of God and the world are opposing kingdoms.

Have you ever been to the dedication of a new building or business? Those who serve and support the project usually share a word about purpose and mission, setting the tone for the years ahead. It was a similar experience at the dedication of the Billy Graham Library on May 31, 2007. Billy's oldest son, Franklin Graham, presented the purpose of the library:

"This library is about the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is my prayer that every person who comes through that door will hear and understand that Jesus Christ died for their sins.... It's a tool for ministry for years to come. It's a tool for evangelism."¹

While the library features refreshments, beautifully maintained landscaping, and interesting memorabilia, the facility finds its purpose in evangelism. That's what it's for.

This week, each morning, before rising from bed, take a moment to dedicate your day to the Lord. Pray: "Lord, this day is Yours. Use me for Your kingdom. Guide my steps and keep my heart aligned with Your will." Choose to give yourself wholeheartedly to the Lord each day this week.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on the difference between a life lived pursuing the fleshly passions and desires of the world and a life lived following God. What would each of those lives look like in how you spend your time and money, the goals you pursue, your career, and your relationships? What impact would you make on the world around you? Reflect on your life and be really honest with yourself. In what ways do you have one foot in each kingdom? How can you let go of the things of the world and fully commit to following God alone?

PRAY for the spiritual battle going on in your own heart and in the world around you. Ask God to give you His wisdom and His Spirit to pursue the things of His kingdom and to walk in His ways. Pray for the ability to trust in the Lord fully, to trust that His ways are right and to trust in what He provides (and what He doesn't). Pray for the strength to stand firm on the Lord when temptations to follow the ways of the world are all around you.

ACT: This week, make a commitment to fully follow God, rather than having one foot in each kingdom. Honestly evaluate your life and the ways you have been trusting in the things of this world or pursuing fleshly passions and desires. Write those things on a piece of paper and then burn it as a representation of crucifying the flesh. Then commit your life to Christ alone going forward. Ask Him to fill you with His Spirit to guide you in following Him alone.

¹ https://billygrahamlibrary.org/on-this-date-billy-graham-library-dedication-may-31-2007/?utm_source=chatgpt.com