



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

James 4:1-10

Fall 2021

"Worldliness"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth, and good morning. We are continuing our studies in the Book of James and we're in Chapter 4; and we're looking at verses 1 through 10. I'm going to begin at verse 18 of the chapter 3. I think you'll see this juxtaposition that seems deliberate. He praises them at the end of chapter 3,

¹⁸ And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

And now chapter 4,

4 What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? ²You 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. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend *it* on your pleasures. ⁴You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: "He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us"? (*Now some of you have different versions, and your verse reads differently*

from that, it is a difference in how you interpret that word, "the Spirit," so we'll talk about that somewhat in the lesson. But I'm reading from the New American Standard Bible, and that's the way they have translated this. Verse 6), ⁶ But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." ⁷ Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

James 4:1-10

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word and bless our time in studying it together.

(Message) The Greeks were Pagans, but famous for philosophy, which literally is "love of wisdom". And they had some wisdom. They showed that with some keen insight on human nature in some of their myths. One is the story of Narcissus, the beautiful boy who one day saw his reflection in a pool and fell in love with it. He couldn't leave the pond and stayed staring at his reflection until he died—full of himself.

And so we now have the term "narcissism," which refers to a preoccupation with self, or 'self-love'. People have that condition. Society's become narcissistic, self-absorbed, and selfish. Luther described the human soul as "curved in on itself." It's a good way of describing what we studied in Sunday School and in the Proverbs, Proverbs 21, verse 2, "Every man's way is right in his own eyes." Men are naturally now 'curved in' on themselves. That's narcissism. That's the world.

Believers in Jesus Christ have been redeemed from that. Still, it happens to Christians. We call it 'worldliness'. We're worldly when we are preoccupied with self; and our thoughts of God, and our desires of obedience to Him, are minimized. I don't say they are absent; they aren't—not altogether. But they're minimized and 'the chief end of

man' is no longer 'to glorify God and enjoy Him forever', but to magnify self and enjoy life.

The modern evangelical church has fit that pattern for a long time. And I say that because I've heard and read things over the years that have made that indictment. In fact, I remember hearing Dr. Johnson many years ago, in the late '60s, speaking of 'easy-going' evangelicalism. But people have written about that.

David Wells, for example, Professor of Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, wrote a series of books in the 1990s critiquing the modern evangelical church. The first was titled *No Place For Truth*. The second was *God in the Wasteland*. The titles themselves just give the idea of the state of the church only a few decades ago. No place for doctrine from a theological understanding of the Christian faith—that's been ignored; and as a result the church is in a spiritual wasteland.

Well, I don't know that things have improved over the years. But then there's nothing new under the sun; and long before any modern writers began to analyze and criticize the church for being shallow and worldly, James called attention to it. The church didn't exist very long before it became enamored of the world and started grasping for things.

So James speaks about it in what may be the strongest words ever written on the problem. He calls them "adulteresses" and 'enemies of God', and tells them, "Cleanse your hands, you sinners." (vs8). That's strong stuff. But let's not kid ourselves; it applies to all of us. He's talking to a church; he's talking to Christians; he's talking to believers, professing believers.

But James also gives the solution, and that is very important—it's humility. He tells us in verse 10 that, "God exalts those who humble themselves." Whatever we may think we gain by exalting ourselves, grasping for, instead of giving, is self-deception. We shrink like Narcissus, rather than grow. We die, rather than live.

The Lord has the best for us—the truly good life. The appearance of that may not seem to be the case but we live by faith, not by sight, and we trust the Word of God; and when we do, we find that it never fails. And God's plan for us and His will for us is the

best. It is the truly good life. Worldliness robs us of that. So it's serious. That's the reason James gives so much attention to it here and vilifies it in such harsh words and stern language.

James begins his broadside on worldliness in verse 1 of chapter 4 with a stark contrast to the previous verse, the last verse of chapter 3; and that's why I started reading there—you see the contrast. James ended with praise for the peacemaker in chapter 3 and here he begins with a question about personal conflicts. He moves from what should be in the church to what so often is in the church: 'wars and quarrels'. That's the meaning of the first words of verse 1. They are used of actual warfare, of national warfare: "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?"

The church had a problem. Evidently this group of churches to which he wrote had a problem with infighting. So James asked them to do some self-analysis to find the origin of their problem. And he doesn't let them analyze things very long before he gives an answer immediately, and he says it's, "...pleasures that wage war in your members." (vs1b).

Now 'pleasure' is not bad. In fact we studied earlier, not that long ago, chapter 1 verse 17, "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights..." So pleasurable things are good, they're not bad—but these "pleasures" are bad. The Greek word that is used here, it's a rare word, but it always has a bad connotation in the New Testament. It's the word from which we get our word *hedonism*. And while James is not necessarily referring to hedonistic pleasures, he's really just identifying carnal cravings—things that in and of themselves are not bad but we have an inordinate desire for them. My neighbor gets a new car—a shiny new BMW—and I'm wondering, "Why I don't have one of those? I should have one of those!"

There's nothing wrong with having that kind of a car but to desire it inordinately, that's what James is speaking of. In verse 2, he calls these "pleasures", he calls them passions or "lust", which is aggressive self-seeking, putting self over others—and it has bad consequences. He gives those consequences in verse 2: "You lust and do not have;

so you commit murder. You're envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask."

But pleasure-seeking, self-seeking, lusting is a dangerous passion because the ultimate end of that is murder. The Bible gives well-known examples: Cain killing his brother Abel out of lust, out of jealousy, for the approval that Abel received from God. Ahab killed Naboth because he coveted his vineyard. And James saw the same problem, the same spirit at work, in the congregations that he wrote to. Not literally murdering; this is hyperbole; it's a deliberate exaggeration to make a point.

Still the essence of murder is hate. In Matthew chapter 5, verses 21 and 22, Jesus equated anger with murder. Earlier in Matthew 15 and verse 19, He said, "...out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders." We have the capacity to so hate someone we wish them dead. That's the nature of worldliness—of lust and envy. It produces anger and fighting; what Jude called "the way of Cain." (vs11).

And this happens in churches with Christians whenever a person takes his or her eyes off of Christ. Then we become preoccupied with self; we desire the wrong things; and we're always unfulfilled. So James explains to them, to his readers and to us, that they were frustrated because they were seeking things the wrong way, "You do not have because you do not ask." (vs2b).

Now James anticipated the response that would come from someone who would say, "Oh, no; I do ask. I ask all the time. I pray for things, but God doesn't answer my prayers." And James answers that 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, 'Your prayers don't have God's interest at heart. Your prayers are selfish. You don't seek to glorify God and enjoy Him forever but to enjoy self and satisfy your desires.'

Now James, he doesn't accuse them of praying for sinful things; that's not what he's saying. He's criticizing their motives (which are selfish). There's nothing wrong with praying for things. There's nothing wrong for praying for money. George Mueller prayed for it so that he could feed his orphans—and God always answered him faithfully. But

these people wanted to gratify their desires. God will not grant us requests that will be misspent and used to our detriment; and used to His dishonor. In fact, no good father would do that; would give that to his or her child.

And so now having exposed the problem of selfishness and worldliness in the church, James condemns it in verse 4 as spiritual unfaithfulness. And he does not mince his words here, "You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." That's a dangerous place to be.

It's possible there were actual cases of adultery in these churches—but that's not really the idea here. If there were, I think James would have called out men as well as women. He wouldn't have only called out the adulteresses, but the adulterers. James is speaking to the church as a whole in its relationship as the bride of Christ—the way the prophets of the Old Testament spoke of Israel as God's wife. And called them that when they were guilty of idolatry. The book of Hosea is probably the classic book of the Old Testament on this very thing; giving the picture of the nation as seen in Hosea's faithless wife, Gomer, who had many lovers; and applies that sin to the nation spiritually.

Any interest in idols was spiritual adultery and an affection for the world—the *cosmos*. Which here is not the physical world but the world *system*—the evil system under the control, or the direction, of Satan. That is an alliance with all that is opposed to God. In Hosea chapter 9, verse 1, the prophet tells Israel, "...you have played the harlot, forsaking your God." And that's what James is saying here: 'Friendship with the world is hostility toward God.' It's spiritual adultery.

Christians can love the people of the world. We should love the people of the world; we should love the lost and seek to bring them to a saving knowledge of Christ—but not the system of the world and its ambitions; its goals and values. The person who deliberately chooses that, has chosen sides and is the enemy of God. 'Do you not know that?', James was asking them. Of course they did. In fact, the question that he poses

expects, grammatically, an affirmative answer. And so this is a rebuke. It's a way of making them recognize their error, facing up to it, and stopping!

So in verse 5 James supports his attack on worldliness from Scripture. (It's always the standard, that's the touchstone of truth.) "Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose?" meaning, 'Do you think it (*Scripture*), doesn't record God's response to things? That He doesn't describe His attitude toward worldliness; that it doesn't state that He's a jealous God?'

Well now, that, I think, is a rhetorical question that, of course, they did know that. Anyone with a modicum of truth of the Scriptures knows God has expressed Himself and revealed His attitude toward these things. So no one's going to say, 'Yes, I think the Bible has little or nothing to say about worldliness and nothing to say about God's attitude toward it.'

But people live as though they have no knowledge of that, or they think that there's nothing said about that. Worldliness does not just happen to us.—It's the result of spiritual drifting; it's the result of disregarding the Scriptures, of growing tired of the fellowship of the saints and the meeting of the church. It was that problem that the author of Hebrews talks about; about "forsaking" the gathering together of the saints. (Heb 10:25). 'Don't do that!', he (*James*), said.

And so people end up as a result of that, (as a result of drifting off), ignoring the Scripture—acting at least as though the Word of God "speaks to no purpose", (vs5); no purpose that the worldly person is interested in.

James seems to have a particular Scripture in mind when he says that, something specifically about *jealousy*. But it's not clear which one that might be. There's no passage in the Old Testament that corresponds exactly to what he says. It could be Exodus chapter 20, verse 5, or Deuteronomy chapter 5, verse 9, both of which speak of God as a "jealous God". But what James meant by God's "...jealousy desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us...", is not clear. I indicated that earlier in the reading of the Scripture.

But I mentioned that because this is what I call a notoriously difficult verse to translate; and you see that if you can set different versions side-by-side and read them. You see that the New American Standard Bible differs from the New International Version, or from the ESV, the English Standard Version, in the way that they interpret "spirit," and also in the way they interpret the one who "desires".

And what is desired? Did James mean 'our spirit *desires* the world', as the New International Version interprets it; or that 'God *longs* for our spirit', as the English Standard Version has it; or that 'God is *jealous* for the Holy Spirit', as the New American Standard Bible translates it?

I think all are true and all are possible. But since the Greek word "spirit" in this text has the definite article, "the Spirit," it's more consistent with usage to understand it as a reference to the Holy Spirit, not the human spirit. So that supports the New American Standard Bible's translation: 'God is a jealous God, and He is jealous for His Holy Spirit, which is within His people, and He will not tolerate rival spirits in our heart, like the spirit of the age, or the spirit of the world.'

But the Holy Spirit can also be taken as the subject of this sentence, (and I'm inclined to that), in which case James was saying that, 'The Holy Spirit desires us'. And when we're desiring the things of the world, and His desire is so strong for us that His desire is like *jealousy*, envy—out of love for us.

In verse 4 James reminded his readers of their spiritual unfaithfulness and that they made themselves enemies of God. He supported that from Scripture, which says God is a jealous God. He won't tolerate compromise with the world and love of the world. Now that's very sobering. First, because it is foolish to make an enemy of the omnipotent, all-powerful God who holds us in His hand, who gives us every breath that we take, every beat of our heart. Worldliness is inviting the world into our heart in a compromising way. It's dangerous; it invites discipline; it invites correction.

But a heart divided against the Holy Spirit, (Who loves us completely and intensely, Who so loves us that He rescued us from death, from spiritual death and

judgment by giving a new birth to us), is also foolish. Why would we turn from Him to something like the world? He made His home in our hearts, gave us regeneration, and took up residence there. And He began cleaning us up, healing us, giving us growth when we were spiritual infants, and guiding us away from sin—the sin that we so much desire to practice. He brings order out of chaos, clarity out of confusion, strength to weakness. That's regeneration and sanctification, which He does for rebels, which He did for us, because He loves us unconditionally.

B. B. Warfield illustrated this from a legend about Francis of Assisi, who was riding along full of joy because of the peace that he found in his heart due to Christ and he wanted to live for Christ in in this world. He wanted his life to reflect that—when a turn in the road brought him face-to-face with a leper. Well, he was repulsed by what he saw, he was horrified at the sight, and immediately turned his horse...when his new life took hold. He quickly returned, gave the astonished leper all of his money, and kissed his hand. But more, he visited the leper colony, showering it with gifts and kind words. He tried to bring light to the gloomy place. His love grew stronger, and instead of visiting the leper colony, he moved in. Warfield said, "Taking up his abode in the midst of the afflicted, he lavished upon them a most touching care, washing and wiping their sores, and all the more gentle and radiant as the sores were more repulsive."

It's a legend. But as Warfield pointed out, not even a magnificent legend can comprehend the richness and mercy of the Spirit's love for us. He's jealous for us. Why would we trade that for the trinkets of this life? Why would we trade a true and selfless Friend for a cheat like the world?

But we do. That's the folly of worldliness and we open our hearts to it every day. Still, the Lord God will not abandon us. He will deal with us, but He will never desert us. And He will deal with us in His grace and mercy. As Paul wrote, 'Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.' (Rom 5:20). And that's the point that James makes in verse 6. "He gives a greater grace." James says. God's grace is greater than our neglectfulness, our sinfulness, our willfulness. It gives the help we need to overcome that. It gives the

help we need against the powerful allure of the world and the selfish drive of the flesh that is always with us. And it's able to work into the unfaithful, sinful believer the desire to surrender to the Lord God. It's a supernatural work that He produces within us.

And again, James gives support for that from the Scriptures. Here from Proverbs chapter 3, verse 34, which gives a warning, but also encouragement. "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (*see also James 4:5*). And he knew that would resonate with believers, (with those who are born again), because in our new life we are basically humble. Not in the old life. But with a new heart there is basic humility there because we know that we're creatures. We know that we are under God and in need of His mercy constantly. And the Scripture has an effect upon us—it has an effect upon the child of God. So in the rest of the passage he emphasizes the importance of humility, and urges them to submit to the Lord.

Now that's the logical response from Proverbs 3 and it's what he says in verses 7 through 10, "Submit therefore to God...Draw near to God...Humble yourselves." In short, James tells the church to 'Repent!' In all of this there is an urgency to the commands that he's given—an urgency to the instruction here.

His command in verse 7 is to, "Submit to God," —and that suggests, again, a military image. The Lord is seen in the sense of being a commander; and we're to surrender to Him; surrender to His rule. That's the cure to worldliness. It's the first step to overcoming worldliness. The prodigal son in the Lord's parable did that when he came to his senses in the pigsty. And that was the beginning of his return from the world and to the prosperity of his father's house.

The other side to submitting is resisting; "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." (vs7b). The word "devil" means *slanderer*. That's what Satan does. In fact, in Revelation 12, verse 10, John says that, 'he slanders God's people before God day and night.' And he slanders God before the world and God's people—and we must resist him—resist his lies.

Eve didn't do that. Satan slandered God by casting doubt on His command and sowing the seed of suspicion in Eve's heart. Adam gave no defense; he offered no resistance—he simply followed. That was the beginning of narcissism, of self-centeredness. "You will be like God", (Gen 3:5), Satan promised. And that was just too attractive for both of them: to be the center of everything, to have all the glory to themselves, and self-rule.

As a result men and women have lived as gods unto themselves ever since. Mankind has been divided against itself; it's been at war literally with itself. That's history. Satan wants us to focus on self, he wants us to keep our souls curved in on itself.

The first Adam didn't resist the devil, but the last Adam did. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, He met each of the devil's temptations with Scripture. Didn't debate him, didn't reason with him, simply quoted the Scriptures to him; and then in the end of it all, He said, "Be gone, Satan." (ESV Matt 4:10).

We resist the devil in that way. We resist the devil first by surrendering to God, and then answering the constant temptations that come to us with Scripture. That's the sword for the battle in the Christian life. In fact, the word "resist" is *stand against* or *stand firm*; it's another military term. Paul used it in Ephesians chapter 6, verse 13, when he's speaking of the spiritual war, the spiritual conflict we're in, and he said that, we are to "take up the whole armor of God...and stand firm." But again, *stand firm* only with sword in hand. The devil flees from that because he can't lead anyone into sin who will not consent. He's a defeated enemy, and cannot control the child of God. He only has influence where we give him a place.

Well next, James says, "Draw near". (vs8). They were far from God. Sin alienates and so they were not walking with the Lord,. They were like the prodigal who had gone off to a far country. But when the prodigal returned to his father and still on the road home, the father ran to meet him and embraced him. And James promises that when we "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." (vs8).

Eternal life is not simply life that's unending. Eternal life essentially is knowing God. That's how Jesus defined it in John 17, verse 3. It is knowing about God, it is knowing about the Triune God—but more than that, it is knowing Him personally. And that's what the Lord came to obtain for us. He came to obtain a personal relationship with us. So we should never fear to “Draw near to God.” He paid a great price to gain that relationship for us.

And He's always waiting for us like the prodigal's father, who would come to the road every day and look down that road for his son. And then one day saw him—and he didn't just look and watch him come, he immediately ran to him and received him—and restored him. That's a parable about the Lord God; that's a parable about the Father. The Lord jealously yearns for us. But He not only yearns for us with a jealous yearning, He yearns for our purity as well; and that's how we return to Him.

The lust for pleasure is what brings trouble and separation; and that must be put away from us. So James says, "Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded." (vs8b). *Hands* signify deeds; we do things with our hands and that's what it represents. And the *heart* is the source of our thoughts and our desires. So what he's saying is, 'Wash your hands. Repent of these deeds that you've done, and clean up your mind.' And we do that by confessing our sins according to 1 John 1, verse 9; 'And God is faithful', we're told, 'and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' Christians are always a confessing people. We're a confessing people day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, for that matter.

Now all of this here, was a call for repentance; for turning from the worldly life which James expands in verses 9 and 10: Expands upon this turning from that life, (and he does use some very forceful language), Verse 9, "Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into gloom." It's like, 'Stop having a party—life is serious!' 'Repent!' he's saying, 'Turn!' "Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into gloom."

This vividly emphasizes human responsibility—but we shouldn't think in terms of penance. We shouldn't think in terms of punishing ourselves to win God's approval, like some monk in a cell wearing a hair shirt and beating himself.

This is really the result of drawing near to God. This is what we will do when we draw near to God. The closer we draw to Him, the more we know Him, the more we know His holiness, His cleanness, and the more we realize our sinfulness and how unappealing that is, and we realize that there's really no such thing as a small sin, an insignificant sin—they're all great. The key though is *drawing near to God*. And we can only do that with a humble heart. So James urges that in verse 10, "Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you."

And again, the prodigal son is the illustration. He left the pigsty, returned home, and confessed, "Father, I have sinned," (Luke 15:21), and immediately the father received him. He didn't even allow his son to complete the speech that he had thought up before he left: 'I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me a servant.' (Luke 15:19). He received him back before he could ever say that; received him back as his son; dressed his son with a fine robe, a ring, and sandals—and then he threw a party, so all could celebrate his son's return. He exalted him. And God the Father, God Almighty, does that for us. Family, forgiveness, and restoration is immediate.

Now sin has consequences, and they may affect a person's life for years to come. They may affect his or her finances, the family, health, reputation. Repentance doesn't necessarily remove those problems. Opportunities squandered are gone. Sin is serious.

Still, what we're told here is God exalts the sinner, the repentant sinner; and that means something. In fact, it means a lot. There is restoration and there is a return to usefulness for the repentant. And is there a better example of that than Peter? He denied the Lord three times, but was restored. Three times the Lord asked him, "Simon, do you love Me?" "Yes, Lord, You know I love You." He served the Lord the rest of his days until the day when he laid down his life for Christ, faithful to the end.

Or Mark, who failed Paul miserably on the first missionary journey. He quit; he went home; he abandoned the mission. But years later Paul told Timothy to "bring Mark,

for he is useful to me for service.",(2 Tim 4:11). And he's been useful to the church down through the centuries, and to us as well. He wrote the second Gospel, he wrote the Gospel of Mark. What a legacy he had.

And we too can be useful for service to one another in the work of the Gospel, the greatest privilege and greatest enterprise on earth. The Lord will exalt us to that, something that the world can never give.

But first we must draw near to God. We must return to our first love, the Lord Jesus Christ. In Colossians chapter 3, verse 2, Paul says, "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth." Whenever the church does that, it becomes powerful; a powerful force for God and for good: "Setting our mind on the things above."

Now you've heard it said that we can become too heavenly-minded to be any earthly good. That is simply not true. That is absolutely false. C. S. Lewis got it right. He wrote, "The apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire; the great men who built up the middle ages; the English evangelicals who abolished the slave trade; all left their mark on earth precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It's since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this."

That's absolutely right. That's worldliness. It's a strong influence and subtle temptation. We need grace to overcome it. We need sovereign grace. May God guard our hearts from that, save us from a wasted life of self-service, self-indulgence, self-gratification, and give us a desire to draw near to Him daily, continually, to Him who loves us and will exalt us to the good life, the very best life.

But that is only experienced in a relationship with the Lord—which is a clean life, a life of forgiveness. And before He exalts anyone to that, they must first be lowered. They must humble themselves; they must deny themselves, they must believe in God's

Son as their God and Savior. And at that moment, He receives you, forgiven, and receives you forever.

If you've not believed, trust in Christ and be saved. And then by God's grace, live for Him. Draw near to Him daily, constantly.

May God help all of us to do that.

Father, we thank You for that grace. It is amazing and we'll spend all eternity contemplating it—time without end, contemplating what You've done for us at Calvary; what You have done for us with Your eternal love. To choose people like us and then send Your Son to purchase us and the Spirit to draw us.

All your work, 100 percent, we give You thanks and praise for Your grace. We pray that we will think about it continually, set our mind on the things above, and that we will live for You—that's the truly good life. May we live it.

Now the Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up His countenance on you and give you peace, in Christ's name. Amen.

(End of Audio)