

The Civil War of the Soul

James 4:1–4 (NASB 1995)

Learning Objectives

- **Remember:** State the direct source of every quarrel and conflict—“your pleasures that wage war in your members” (James 4:1).
- **Understand:** Explain why prayers go unanswered: selfish motives that seek to spend God’s gifts on personal gratification (James 4:3).
- **Analyze:** Distinguish the internal civil war of unmortified lust from the external betrayal of “friendship with the world,” which Scripture labels spiritual adultery.
- **Apply:** Identify one specific conflict weighing on you right now and confess the precise selfish craving (control, recognition, comfort, being right) that is fueling it—then mortify it at the cross.

Introduction

The most destructive battle you will ever fight is not across a national border, a political aisle, or even a church split. It is the insurgency operating inside your own heart.

We are usually convinced the real trouble started somewhere outside of us:

Somebody said something.

Somebody overlooked us.

Somebody pushed too far.

Somebody did not listen.

Somebody got in the way.

James will not let us hide there. He has already diagnosed the symptoms: a tongue that sets forests ablaze (3:6) and a “wisdom” that is earthly, natural, and demonic (3:15). Now he moves from smoke to arsonist. He is no longer treating the cough; he is exposing the cancer. James 4:1–4 is the divine MRI of congregational strife. It refuses every horizontal excuse and drives the blade straight into the heart.

Thesis

Worldly desires destroy unity and betray God’s friendship, demonstrating that every conflict within the Church is rooted in the selfish, unmortified cravings of the heart.

I. The Source of All Conflict (James 4:1–2)

A. The Internal Battleground

“What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?”

The Greek words *polemoi* and *machai* are not polite disagreements; they are wars and battles—civil war inside the household of faith. The culprit is *hēdonai*—the very word from which we get “hedonism.” These are not harmless preferences; they are driving, sensual cravings for self-gratification that have broken loose from Christ’s lordship. James pictures them as an organized army: they “wage war” (*strateuomai*)—a sustained military campaign inside your own body.

This same warfare rages in every believer who has not yet fully surrendered the flesh. Paul cries out in Romans 7:23 that he sees another law at work in his members, waging war against the law of his mind and making him a prisoner of the law of sin at work within him. The apostle is not describing an unbeliever but the ongoing struggle of a redeemed man whose old nature still fights for control. James 1:14–15 explains the mechanism: each person is tempted when dragged away and enticed by his own evil desire; then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death. The battlefield is not first the foyer, the elders’ meeting, or the parking lot. The first battlefield is the soul. Before there are factions, there are cravings. Before gossip, there is hunger for recognition. Before division, there is insistence on my way.

Peter uses identical language: “fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11). Paul says the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit (Galatians 5:17). Proverbs 4:23 commands us to guard the heart above all else, for everything we do flows from it—because the heart is the command center where these cravings launch their campaigns.

B. The Fruit of Unfulfilled Lust

“You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel.”

James is exposing the murderous logic of envy and malice. Jesus already said that hatred in the heart is murder (Matthew 5:21–22); John adds that everyone who hates his brother is a murderer (1 John 3:15). When a desire is denied, it does not quietly submit—it destroys whatever stands in its way: reputation, influence, relationship.

The first murder in Scripture sprang from exactly this root. In Genesis 4, Cain’s offering was rejected while Abel’s was accepted; Cain’s frustrated desire for divine approval turned to burning anger and he rose up and killed his brother. The same pattern appears in Galatians 5:19–21, where the works of the flesh include enmity, strife, jealousy, and outbursts of anger—clear evidence that unmortified lust produces relational bloodshed. Proverbs 14:30

warns that “a heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones,” showing that the internal cancer eventually kills everything around it.

Illustration: The Mutiny

Picture your life and your church as a ship under Christ’s command. Every desire is a crew member meant to obey the Captain. When one desire—comfort, control, prestige—decides it will no longer submit, a mutiny begins. It recruits allies: pride, self-pity, fear of man. Soon the whole vessel is in chaos. The shouting on deck is only the visible spray of an internal rebellion against Christ’s rule.

Applications

- **Personal:** Next time anger flares, stop and ask: “What desire of mine is being frustrated right now?” Name it—respect, control, comfort—and confess it.
- **Church:** Church fights rarely start over doctrine; they start when someone’s pleasure (their way, their influence) feels threatened. Treat conflict as a spiritual crisis, not a communication problem.
- **Generational:** If we teach our children that their happiness is the highest good, we are raising the next generation of church-fighters. Model mortification instead.

II. The Failure of Misdirected Prayer (James 4:2b–3)

A. The Sin of Prayerlessness

“You do not have because you do not ask.”

Some Christians scheme, manipulate, and pressure others—but never kneel. That is functional atheism dressed up as independence. They would rather fight their brother than petition their Father.

Psalm 66:18 lays down the same principle: “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.” David, after experiencing God’s deliverance, confesses that hidden sin creates a barrier no amount of religious activity can cross. Philippians 4:6–7 commands the opposite path: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God,” promising that the peace of God will guard hearts and minds when we actually bring our needs to Him instead of handling them in the flesh.

B. The Corruption of Motive

Even when they do pray, heaven is brass: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.” The adverb *kakōs* means “evilly, basely, twisted.” The same *hēdonai* that wage war inside now hijack the prayer.

They treat God like a celestial vending machine—funding their rebellion so they can “spend” (*dapanaō*) His gifts on self-gratification, exactly as the Prodigal wasted his father’s substance (Luke 15:14).

First John 5:14–15 anchors true prayer in the will of God: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.” Psalm 37:4 invites us to “delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart,” but the context makes clear that when the Lord Himself becomes our delight, our desires are transformed into His desires.

Gospel Gem

God will not finance rebellion. If your deepest desire is self-gratification, He will let your prayer bounce off the ceiling—not because He lacks power, but because He loves you too much to underwrite your destruction. He refuses to give you what will only intensify the war against Him.

This demolishes health-and-wealth theology. God does not promise to fulfill every lust; He promises to supply what is needed for godliness. When the motive is fleshly pleasure, the answer is mercifully “No.”

Applications

- **Personal:** Before you pray about that strained relationship again, strip the religious language: “If God gave me this, would it primarily exalt Christ or merely increase my comfort and control?”
- **Church:** When a church prays for growth only to outshine another congregation, or for unity only to silence dissent, it is asking God to bankroll its *hēdonai*.
- **Generational:** Teach children to pray “Your will be done,” not “Give me what I want.” Model prayers anchored in God’s glory, not personal vending-machine requests.

III. The Sin of Spiritual Adultery (James 4:4)

A. The Identity of the Worldly

“You adulteresses!”

The feminine plural is deliberate. James borrows the Old Testament prophets’ language: Israel became an adulterous wife whenever she chased idols or foreign alliances (Hosea 2:2; Jeremiah 3:1; Ezekiel 16). In Hosea, God commands the prophet to marry an unfaithful woman as a living picture of Israel’s betrayal; the entire book is a heartbroken Husband calling His wayward wife to return. Jeremiah 3:1 pictures the nation as a wife who has played the harlot with many lovers yet expects to come back as though nothing happened. Ezekiel 16 delivers the most

graphic portrait of Jerusalem as an abandoned infant rescued and married by God, only to use His gifts to chase every passing idol. The Church is the Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25–27). Second Corinthians 11:2 echoes the same bridal imagery: Paul desires to present the church “as a pure virgin to Christ,” warning that anything less is spiritual unfaithfulness. Isaiah 54:5 declares, “For your Maker is your husband—the Lord Almighty is his name.” To claim Christ as Savior while courting the system that crucified Him is covenant betrayal.

B. The Definition of Enmity

“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.”

“World” (*kosmos*) is not the planet or its people; it is the organized system of values, philosophies, and desires that functions apart from and against God. There is no neutral ground. To wish for the world’s approval, lifestyle, and priorities is to declare yourself God’s enemy—by your own deliberate choice.

Romans 8:7 states plainly that “the mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.”

First John 2:15–17 warns with apostolic urgency: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for

the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.” John is writing to churches facing the pull of surrounding culture; he draws a line that cannot be blurred: friendship with the world is not a minor compromise—it is active opposition to the Father.

Illustration: The Divided Lover

A husband cannot say, “I love you, but I want to keep a room in my ex’s house and spend weekends there,” and expect the marriage to thrive. Yet countless Christians keep a decorated room in the world’s house—its entertainment, ambitions, and values—and expect God to be satisfied with Sunday visits. Divided love is not immaturity; it is adultery.

Applications

- **Personal:** Where are you nurturing friendship with the world under a religious veneer—in entertainment, ambitions, compromises for acceptance? That choice is enmity against God.
- **Church:** If our fights look exactly like the world’s political bickering, we have proven whose friend we really are.

- **Generational:** We lose our youth when we try to make the church “worldly enough” to keep them. We are training them in the very friendship that makes them God’s enemies. Live undivided loyalty before them.

Conclusion

The conflicts you see in your home, the church, and even in your own mind are only the visible smoke. The real war rages within. You will never have lasting peace with your brother until you declare war on your own selfish desires.

Review

- I. Confess the lusts that wage war in your members and stop shifting the blame.
- II. Pray with right motives—seeking God’s glory rather than your own comfort.
- III. Break your friendship with the world and choose full loyalty to Christ.

Exhortation

Take a moment right now and identify the heaviest conflict in your life. Stop looking at what the other person did. Turn the question inward: “What selfish pleasure of mine am I protecting?” Name it

honestly. Confess it before God. Mortify it at the cross. Then come back to your Father—not to demand your will, but to surrender to His.

Word Study Table

| GREEK TERM | TRANSLITERATION | MEANING IN CONTEXT | KEY INSIGHT |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|---|---|
| ἡδονή / ἡδοναῖς | hēdonē / hēdonais | Sensual, selfish cravings | The internal army driving every conflict |
| στρατεύω / στρατεύονται | strateuomai / strateuontai | To wage war as a soldier, sustained campaign | Lusts actively assault the soul |
| δαπανάω / δαπανήσητε | dapanaō / dapanēsēte | To spend/waste resources | Prayer twisted to fund rebellion |
| μοιχαλῖς / μοιχαλίδες | moichalis / moichalides | Adulteress(es) | Church as unfaithful Bride of Christ |

| GREEK TERM | TRANSLITERATION | MEANING IN CONTEXT | KEY INSIGHT |
|------------|-----------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| κόσμος | kosmos | Organized system of rebellion against God | Friendship with it = declared enmity |

Scripture Reference Table

| REFERENCE | CONNECTION | THEME |
|--------------------------|-------------------|--|
| James 4:1–4 | Primary text | Source of conflict, corrupt prayer, spiritual adultery |
| James 3:13–18 | Background | Earthly wisdom producing disorder |
| 1 Peter 2:11 | Parallel | Lusts waging war against the soul |
| 1 John 3:15 | Doctrinal | Hatred = murder in the heart |
| Ephesians 5:25–27 | Covenant imagery | Church as pure Bride of Christ |
| Galatians 5:17, 24 | Internal conflict | Flesh vs. Spirit; crucify the lusts |
| Hosea 2:2; Jeremiah 3 | OT type | Israel as adulterous wife |

| REFERENCE | CONNECTION | THEME |
|-----------------|------------|------------------------------|
| Matthew 5:21–22 | Heart-root | Anger and envy condemned |
| Luke 15:14 | Lexical | “Spending” on riotous living |

The war is inside. The remedy is the cross. Surrender today.