

# James

Not Praying, Bad Praying

February 26, 2012

## I. Introduction

A. **James 4:1-10** . . . What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your 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. [4] 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. [5] Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: "He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us"? [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.

## B. Prayer

## II. Prayer and Conflict

A. **James 4:2b-3** . . . 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.

1. As we prepare to consider these words from God, I want to remind you that earthly wisdom promotes selfishness, produces dissension, and leads to damaged or broken relationships. Heavenly wisdom promotes love – love for God, love for others, and love for what is right and good. And heavenly wisdom produces peace, the kind of peace which leads to healthy and harmonious relationships.
2. It is also important to keep in mind that the way we handle conflict reveals the source of the wisdom we are using.
3. And as we have already talked about, what is going on in our heart has more to do with how we handle conflict than the conflict itself, or the circumstances surrounding the conflict, or the people involved.

4. Finally, when encountering any conflict, we are faced with one of two choices, and we will make our choice based on what we hold most dear.
  - a. We will either choose self, pleasing self, and earthly wisdom,
  - b. Or we will choose God, pleasing God, godly wisdom, and godly character.
    - (1) Obviously, the more we value God and pleasing God and fellowship with God and godly character, the more we will choose God and His ways when dealing with conflict.
    - (2) But there is another truth here that ought to be make clear: choosing God and His ways might require patiently waiting a long time, or it might possibly mean never gaining a mutually agreed on solution to the conflict. Yet the other side of that disappointing loss is the invaluable gain of spiritual profit in the form of becoming more like Christ, gaining more intimacy with God, and knowing that you are pleasing God.
5. Therefore, as we continue working our way through **James 4:1-10**, I encourage you to keep these truths in mind.

**B. James 4:2b . . . You do not have because you do not ask.**

1. Consider: God moves from pointing out it is our sinful pleasures and envious longings that lie at the source of conflict, to talking about prayer. And in fact, He isn't talking about praying, but our lack of prayer and the inappropriate use of prayer.
2. So why does God tie together the source of conflict, which is our unfulfilled pleasures and unobtained envyings, and our failure in prayer?
  - a. God ties them together because both of them are directly related to the way we deal with conflict, and both of them represent two potential sinful conditions in us: selfishness and pride.
    - (1) God is calling our attention to selfishness because we are so prone to treating our wants and felt-needs as if they are more important than loving God, pleasing God, drawing near to God, and loving others as ourselves.
      - (a) And when we make our selfish wants and felt-needs more important than loving and pleasing God, we are not interested in praying for that which would please God and profit us spiritually. We are focused on obtaining what we want. Now if our best efforts fail to get us what we want, we may turn to prayer, but our prayers will be in keeping with our selfish interests, not God's interests.

- (b) You see, selfishness naturally turns our attention away from God and puts it squarely on ourselves. And sadly, in these moments of selfishness we may think God is still the most important being to us.
      - i) However, can God be the supreme being in our lives at the same time we are making ourselves the supreme being?
      - ii) We all know the answer to that, so it is not knowing the answer, but being honest about how we are living the answer that can make a difference in how we deal with conflict.
  - (2) But it isn't just selfishness that drives conflict and our failure in prayer, pride is also a driving force. The truth is, we are acting from pride when we exalt ourselves as being more capable than God in determining our needs. And it is also true that we are acting from pride when we turn away from trusting and obeying God in order to take matters into our own hands in relation to meeting our needs and protecting our well-being.
    - (a) You see, when we distrust God's ways of dealing with conflict it is because we believe we know more than He does, and this is pride.
    - (b) And when we reject God's ways of dealing with conflict because we do not like the possible outcomes, it is because we believe our desired outcome is better than whatever outcomes He desires for us. And this too is pride.
- 3. What is the point here? Selfishness and pride on our part keep us from dealing with conflict in God's prescribed ways. But they do more than that.
  - a. They weaken us spiritually, they turn us against God, they lower the value we place on God, they harden our heart to the word of God, they exalt worldly wisdom over heavenly wisdom, they breed distrust of God and discontentment with God, they steal our inward peace, they urge us to believe that meekness and patience are weaknesses to be avoided, and they damage our relationships with those around us.
  - b. So, when we give in to our pleasures and envyings, we are giving in to selfishness and pride – which turn us away from trust in God and obedience to God – and that turns us away from praying

to God about resolving the conflict in a way that serves the best interests of both parties involved.

4. Consider: Even if you get what you want by winning the dispute or getting your way in the conflict, you have lost far more than you have gained. And why do I say this? Because in choosing self over God and His ways, you have traded pleasing God and whatever spiritual profit you would gain by dealing with conflict God's ways, for a temporary victory that feeds your flesh, impoverishes your soul, and makes it that much harder for you to live for God in the days ahead. And so I urge all of us, hold God in highest esteem, always, and turn to Him in prayer at the first sign of unfulfilled desires, or at the first hint of envy, or when you realize you are caught in a conflict.
5. Jesus said: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. **Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life**, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal" (**John 6:26-27**).
6. A few thoughts about turning to God in prayer
  - a. Turning to God in unselfish prayer requires faith in God's essential goodness to provide what we need regardless of what we may think we need, and to protect us according to what He deems wise, and to do what is best for our spiritual development.
  - b. Turning to God in unselfish prayer requires valuing what God values, being content with what God gives, does, and allows, and longing for the spiritual profit that comes from God's dealings with us in relation to what we are praying about.
  - c. Turning to God in prayer requires the kind of confident trust that is willing to patiently wait for God to meet the need or provide the protection requested.

C. **James 4:3** . . . You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

1. I know that in talking about not praying we have covered some of the truths concerning praying with wrong motives. So bear with me if there is some overlap here and you hear again some of what you have already heard.
2. God moves from not praying when we ought, to praying but not getting the answer requested. It is as if He is anticipating the "Yes, but" in response to His saying, "You do not have because you do not ask." To which you say, "Not so, Lord. I have asked, but not received!"

3. According to this scripture, the reason we have not received what we have asked for is because our prayers are a direct reflection of wanting our will to be done, rather than God's will being done. But, you say, God says, "Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart" (**Psalms 37:4**). Yes he does! And there is not a truer statement from God's mouth, nor a more misunderstood and misapplied truth in all of scripture.
4. In light of this portion in James, let's take a close look at **Psalms 37:4** . . . Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart.
  - a. Which is the most important statement in this verse: delight yourself in the Lord, or He will give you the desires of your heart? Neither is more important than the other. Both are equally important to the principle conveyed about prayer. And right there is the problem, for we are prone to place the weight of importance on "and He will give you the desires of your heart" while giving little thought to what is meant by "Delight yourself in the Lord."
  - b. However, the first statement is the qualifying condition for receiving the fulfillment of the promise – which makes them equally important. In other words, delighting ourselves in the Lord is the pre-requisite for receiving the desires of our heart.
  - c. Why? Because to delight ourselves in anything other than God is to prefer what is not of God over what is of God, and to prefer something other than God over God himself. In other words, to delight ourselves in something other than God is like a husband delighting himself in a woman other than his wife, or a wife delighting herself in a man other than her husband. And we know how easily such delighting leads to adultery.
    - (1) So let me ask you, would you fulfill the desires of your spouse's heart if your spouse was finding his or her delight in someone other than you?
    - (2) And let's push this one step further. Would you fulfill the desires of your spouse's heart if your spouse was committing adultery?
    - (3) Now let's go one last step with this example. Would you fulfill the desires of your spouse's heart if your spouse was delighting in someone other than you, committing adultery, and asking for things that would enable your spouse to continue living a selfish, immoral, self-gratifying, relationship damaging, and marriage breaking life-style?

- d. Sadly, and to our shame, we are sometimes delighting in someone or something other than God, committing adultery on God, and all the while counting on God to answer our prayers for things will enable us to continue living a selfish, ungodly, self-gratifying, relationship damaging, and unloving toward others life-style. Are you beginning to see why God says: “You ask and do not receive because you ask with wrong motives so that you may spend it on your pleasure?”
- 5. If you are beginning to understand these words from **James 4:3**, then I want to take you a bit further in what all this means and how we might remedy it.
- 6. David understood how vital our heart is in relation to what we delight in, desire, long for, and subsequently say and do. And because I long for you to see how vital the intentions and longings of your heart are to everything spiritual, I want to take us to **Psalms 51:10-12** where David says: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit.”
  - a. These words from David were written soon after Nathan, God’s prophet, confronted David about his sin of adultery and murder. And to better understand them, let me remind you that David speaks often of loving God and longing to live in obedience to all God’s commands. And such love and obedience in their purer form is a matter of the heart, not just the mind.
  - b. Now it is obvious that David loved something more than God when he invited Bathsheba to his castle, and when he had her husband murdered to cover his sin of adultery.
- 7. So notice what David asks of God! He asks God to create in him a clean heart. Why? Because he knew his heart was soiled with the dirt of sin, and he understood that such things as evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and slanders would keep coming from his heart (**Matthew 15:19**) if it were not cleansed.
  - a. So David turned to God – the very one he had sinned against – to plead for help in regaining a clean heart.
  - b. Oh, beloved, we need a clean heart just as much as David needed a re-cleaned heart. And our first step in remedying a dirty heart is to go back to God, confess our sin, make things right with all those we have sinned against, and then ask God’s help in regaining a clean heart. Of course, we must do our part too, but

a clean heart is so vital to Christian living that we are fools not to press God for His help in gaining such a heart.

- c. But David did not stop there. Remember our “Delight yourself in the Lord” condition? David went on to ask God to restore to him the joy of God’s salvation! He wanted to find his delight in God again, and no longer in selfish pleasures or protecting his pride. Why? Because here again David understood that what he delighted in had a profound effect on how he lived and how he dealt with God.
- d. If your delight is not in God and God alone, then I urge you to go to Him in prayer and press Him to teach you and bring you to that place where He is your joy and delight – above all other joys and delights.

### III. Conclusion

- A. **You do not have because you do not ask** – may we be people who pray first and often about what is in our heart, what comes out of our mouth, what we do, and above all, what we treasure.
- B. **You ask and do not receive because you ask with wrong motives so that you may spend it on your pleasures** – if this applies to you, I urge you to go back to God and implore His help in regaining a pure heart and the joy that comes from delighting in Him above all others and all else.