



## Your Church Quarrels Are Spiritual Adultery: A Hard Truth from James 4

**Stop spiritual adultery now.** Many people reminisce about the “good old days” and about how things were so much better. Older generations will often do this, because the trials and challenges of life then have passed, and the “bad old days” fade away. One young lady said that she wished she lived in the 1940s because it was so much better then. When reminded that the United States was in a war for survival, she said, “Oh, but we won that.”

People will look to what is often called the “golden age” of a nation or a movement. Histories have been written about the “Golden Age of Greece”, or the “Golden Age of Rome”. Of course, the authors were viewing those ages from a very narrow perspective, because in many ways, those were brutal societies.

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Too often, Christians will make similar comments. “Oh, I wish I lived during the time of Jesus and the early church. To actually hear and see the Lord. To hear the words of the apostles and see the miracles that they performed. What a wonderful time to be a Christian.”

But the opening words of chapter 4 indicate that the time of the early church was hardly a “golden age”. In verses 1-6, James made some very strong statements about the conduct of Christians.

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“What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? 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. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. 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. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: ‘He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us’? But He gives a greater grace. Therefore, it says, ‘God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’”

*James 4:1-6*

These first six verses hardly describe Christians that have a loving relationship with God and a Christ-like love for one another! Remember that this letter was not written to a specific congregation but was a general letter. If James was one of the earliest letters written, then most of the members of many of the congregations were probably Jewish but a growing number of gentiles would also become members.

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All the problems described in the first six verses were probably not found in every congregation of the Lord's Church, but they were common enough that at least some of the issues did exist from time to time.

## Where Do Quarrels Really Come From?

Verse 1: "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?" The King James Version described this as "wars and fightings", but James was not referring to physical and armed conflict. Instead, he was describing constant bickering and arguments within a congregation. Too often, two men, supposed brothers in Christ, will greet one another with a glare or a stiff greeting.

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In one congregation, one group would sit on one side of the building during services and the opposing group would sit on the other! Such attitudes and actions do NOT come from a Christ-like love for one another but are clearly worldly. There is no way that such actions will



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be pleasing to God! "Yes, I know, but he did..." "I know what the Bible says, but..." Excuses are irrelevant, and the source of such attitudes is selfish, self-centered pleasures. "I want my way!"

James did not stop there. In verses 2-3, he wrote, "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. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." Again, harsh words are used. "You lust so you commit murder."

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Although some so-called Christians have been guilty of physical murder, the New Testament has a different meaning. In 1 John 3:15, John wrote, "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." So, becoming so angry with a brother or sister in Christ to the point of hatred is the SAME THING as murder in God's eyes. Constant quarrels and verbal fighting feed anger. If the issue is not scripturally resolved, then the anger can turn to hatred, and that is murder! "Well, I don't want to hurt the church so I will leave and go to another church!" But if the hatred is still there, then nothing has changed. The change MUST COME within each individual.



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What can be the source of such quarrels? James said it was envy. This carries the idea of being jealous because someone else has something that “I want but I can’t have”. The devil is more than ready to feed envy and build a fire of anger, and that leads to quarrels.

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Some may scheme and plot on how to get their way, but with no success. Any prayers asking for God’s help will be ignored because they are said with the wrong motives. God is all-knowing. Not only will a prayer said with the wrong motives not be answered, but it will anger God because the intent is opposed to His Will.

### Friendship with the World = Enmity with God

Verses 4-6 give a stern warning: “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. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: ‘He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us’? But He gives a greater grace. Therefore, it says, ‘God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’”

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Several passages in the New Testament describe the relationship between Jesus Christ and Christians as a marriage. In Ephesians 5:22-33, Paul wrote of the relationship between husband and wife; but the main focus was on the relationship between Christ Jesus and the church. The message from James is clear. When a person obeys the Gospel message and is baptized into Christ, then that person is added to the church. The relationship is very much like the marriage relationship. As a Christian, a person has the responsibility to become more Christ-like in actions and attitudes. But if a Christian, or Christians, are guilty of the practices described above, then that Christian, or Christians, are guilty of adultery! That is why James addresses his audience as **adulteresses**.

What does a husband or wife feel if they find out that their spouse has been unfaithful? The wronged spouse would feel at least betrayal and anger. The actions described above are the opposite of how a Christian is expected to act. Such actions come from practices of the world, and anyone that does not separate himself from the world is an enemy of God. Why? Because that person is guilty of spiritual adultery.

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The Lord God is a jealous God. The Lord God is a loving God. He allowed His Son to be tortured to death for the sins of mankind. When a man or woman declares that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and is baptized for remission of sins, he/she has made a LIFETIME commitment. And if that person refuses to discard the attitudes and practices of the world, then that person has disrespected the sacrifice of God's Son and has insulted the Living God.

In a good sense, God is jealous for His children. That includes the idea of warmth and protectiveness much as a parent has for his/her small child. But it can also mean great anger when a Christian refuses to live a Christian life. Hebrews 10:26-31 contains one of the strongest warnings in the New Testament of turning away or rejecting that relationship with God. The warning ends by stating, "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

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The Way Back: Submit, Resist, Draw Near

The message of verses 7-10 is an exhortation:

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“Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.”

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*James 4:7-10*

The word “therefore” is important. Basically, James was saying, “I have described the actions and attitudes that must be rejected and condemned, and now I am going to tell you what you need to do.” And the first step that any Christian must do is to **submit to God**. The basis of worldly actions is human pride and a refusal to change or a falling back into old habits.

James went on to say, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” The devil would like people to think that he is incredibly powerful and unstoppable, but that is a lie. The devil does have a certain amount of power, but it is limited. The devil is a coward, and when a Christian resists his temptations and stands firm in the Lord, the devil doesn’t just go away — he flees.

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This world is a fallen world. When Adam and Eve sinned, as recorded in Genesis 3:17, God told Adam, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat from it’; cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field...” Therefore, physically, there is suffering in the world that comes from natural events such as storms, floods, droughts, and many other such things. But the devil does not control the forces of nature. God is in control.

Instead, James declared, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” God fills His creation with His presence, and when trials, temptations, and suffering occurs, every Christian should know and TRUST that God the Father is always there. Now, a person may decide to take matters in his/her own hands, and God will allow that. He will back away. But when that Christian turns to Him, He is there. It is much like a small child wants to do something and his/her father is standing nearby. The child says, “No! I want to do it myself!” So, the father backs off. But when that child starts having trouble and turns back for help, that father is right there.

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But turning back to God is only part of the answer. James went on to say, “Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” Genuine repentance requires action. Worldly attitudes and actions soil and stain a person’s soul and spirit. There must



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be a mental and spiritual “house cleaning”. There must be a recommitment and focus on what the Lord wants and not the world. Some may try to excuse actions by saying, “I can’t help it. That’s just the way I am.” “I act this way because I had a bad childhood.” Such excuses are lies. Each person is responsible for his/her own actions and will face the consequences for those decisions.

Verses 9-10 state, “Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.” James is not saying that Christians should walk around with long faces and sad expressions. Too many passages state that Christians should rejoice in the Lord.

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Instead, these two passages show the actions of a Christian that comes to the realization that he/she has been ruled by the worldly nature instead of a Christ-directed life. The smug, comfortable attitude that “I am just fine, and God is happy with me” is suddenly ripped away. Genuine repentance includes a serious re-examination of a person’s life; and at the conclusion of that re-examination is the realization: **“I am NOT right with the Lord. I have NOT been living and serving as I should. My very soul is in danger of being lost!”**



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No wonder that confidence and contentment are replaced with distress, mourning and weeping. No wonder that laughter becomes gloom! It does not matter what has been accomplished in this life, if a person loses his/her soul. The change in attitude indicates an immediate determination to change back to following and serving the Lord. While God recognizes and forgives real repentance, if a Christian has drifted deep into the ways of the world, then that journey back may be difficult. But if the commitment is there, then that person's struggle will be successful.

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*Stop spiritual adultery now. Submit to God, resist the devil, and He will lift you up.*

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

#### **What does James 4:1-10 mean about quarrels among Christians?**

James teaches that quarrels come from selfish pleasures and envy. He warns that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God, and calls believers to submit to God, resist the devil, repent with mourning, and humble themselves.



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### **Why does James call Christians 'adulteresses' in James 4:4?**

Because the relationship between Christ and the church is like a marriage. Loving the world more than God is spiritual unfaithfulness - adultery against God.

### **How can I resist the devil according to James 4:7?**

Submit to God first, then resist the devil. When you stand firm in the Lord, the devil will flee from you.

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### **What does it mean to humble yourself before the Lord?**

To honestly recognize your sin, mourn over it, stop making excuses, and turn back to God in full repentance. God promises to exalt the humble.



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