



# FISHHAWK

## FELLOWSHIP CHURCH

## WHY WE FIGHT AND HOW TO STOP

*James 4:1-12*

### LEADER'S GUIDE

#### GETTING STARTED

*As your group time begins, use this section to help get the conversation going.*

**What is the silliest fight you have gotten in lately? How long did it go on?**

**You've likely been involved in a foolish fight that you knew was silly but kept pressing into. Why do we prolong silly fights?**

**If you could identify one core issue behind most of the fights you get into, what would it be?**

Silly fights happen all the time, just ask someone with siblings or a spouse. No one likes to be wrong so we dig in our heels, even when we are wrong. Often it is the smallest and most insignificant fights that become long-term sources of strain in our lives and our relationships. When we fight about petty things and allow those arguments to get out of control, James says there is one main cause—jealousy. We want something we don't have, and believe it is so important to have our way that we fight for it. Today we will look into James's practical wisdom to see why we fight and how to stop.

#### DISCUSSION

##### **> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 4:1-3.**

**This weekend we heard from James that most fights stem from jealousy. How does this square with your own experience? How has jealousy been the cause of some of your disagreements?**

**If you are honest, what incites your jealousy?**

James said that fights come from unmet desires and disappointments. So how are our desires linked to jealousy? The word James used for desires is where we get the English word "hedonism," which is the pursuit of pleasure. We want things, and we don't get them. Those unsatisfied desires lead to all kinds of

fighting. We feel as though we don't have what we need and see someone else who has it. If you think back through many of your fights, you should be able to identify some kind of unmet desire as the root cause.

**Where do you see self-indulgence working in our broader culture? How does what you see around you support what James is saying in Scripture?**

**Look through Genesis 4:1-8. What led Cain to kill his brother? Why can we simply not afford to let jealousy and sinful desires continue unchecked (see verse 7)?**

**How would you respond to someone who chases sinful desires with excuses like, "live and let live," or "I'm just pursuing my own truth"?**

Modern American culture is among the most self-indulgent cultures. In our culture, fulfilling your desires at any cost is seen as a virtue. We like things fast, and we like things easy. Marketing campaigns focus on our desires and how quickly they can be met with a product. Additionally, many people believe that if our desires don't hurt anyone else, then it gives us license to do whatever we want. Christians are called to care because people whose primary goal is to chase their desires only hurt themselves in the end. Furthermore, wanting what God does not want us to have leads to all manners of brokenness. This is obvious in the first murder. Cain wanted the approval that Abel received, so he killed him. The same sin that lurked at Cain's door lurks at yours.

**> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 4:4-10.**

**The same power that raised Jesus from the dead—what we celebrated last week—gives us the power to overcome our desires. Why, then, don't we turn to God to overcome our sinful desires? How can we make turning to God in the midst of our desires a pattern in everyday life?**

**How does being in love with the things of the world harm our relationship with God? Is there anything you need to change about your relationships with people or your desires for things as a result of being taught by God's Word?**

**Who is the most humble person you know? What could you emulate about his or her life? How does cultivating a humble heart keep us away from jealousy and conflict with others?**

We are a proud people—too proud to admit that we need help with our jealousy, and too proud to submit ourselves to God. This was the problem from the garden. When we deny God the chance to overwhelm our desires, we keep the resurrection from being effective in our lives. Jesus died for your sinful desires. To spurn His help is to spurn His sacrifice. We reject the cross when we reject the transformation it brings to our lives. Humility is the path to God and away from our sinful desires that cause jealousy and conflict. Relief from jealousy comes when we come near to God and confess our sins.

**> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 4:11-12.**

Have you ever gotten in a fight because you said something that you shouldn't have said? What led you to speak those words?

This weekend, we heard that the way out of jealousy is to celebrate others. How is celebration the opposite of jealousy? What has God done for someone else in your life that you need to celebrate?

How does celebration warm your heart not only toward other people, but also toward God?

It is hard to slander someone and be jealous of them if you are celebrating them. Celebration acknowledges all the ways that God is blessing someone else instead of focusing on all the ways you feel as though you have been slighted. God loves you and wants to give good gifts to you. The most profound gift is the grace of Jesus Christ. When we humbly accept His grace, we will become thankful people who have no desire to slander others and malign the work of God in their lives. To be content is to trust that God wants and will give good gifts to you.

**APPLICATION**

*Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.*

**How does your own selfishness affect and harm other people? Why is this something that we cannot afford to ignore as followers of Christ?**

**Which relationship in your life could benefit from greater humility?**

**How could actively celebrating people instead of judging them and being jealous of them lead to opportunities for you to share the grace of God with them?**

**PRAYER**

Pray that God would work in your heart and life and keep you from jealousy. Ask Him to help you celebrate His grace at work in others' lives, and to help you come to Him in humility and receive His grace.

**MY NEXT STEPS**

1. This week, I will memorize James 4:8a, "Come near to God and He will come near to you ..."
2. This week, I will come near to God by daily setting aside some time to pray and read the Bible.

3. This week, I will answer the question, "Who or what is currently determining my self-worth and value?" and ask forgiveness if it's anything other than Jesus.
4. This week, I will write a note to someone celebrating the great things God is doing in their life.

## COMMENTARY

### JAMES 4:1-12

**4:1.** Two rhetorical questions try to locate the source of struggles and fights among Christians. Such fights and quarrels come from desires that battle within you.

The fights and quarrels involved conflicts among Christians. The plural form of both words indicates the conflicts were chronic rather than a one-time incident. The disputes could have taken the form of arguments and controversies between teachers and factions in the churches. It could also have involved struggles about worldly affairs such as personal influence and financial gain.

The Greek word translated "desires" is related etymologically to the English word, hedonism, the philosophy that the chief purpose of living is to satisfy self. Jesus used the same word to describe people "choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and ... do not mature" (Luke 8:14). There "pleasures" described any personal goal such as money, reputation, or success, which contributes to personal accomplishment rather than God's will.

These sinful desires lay within each Christian. Even believers find in themselves an alien army which seeks self rather than God. These desires express our pre-Christian nature still seeking to control our lives (see Rom. 7:14–25). Christians will never be freed from the evil influence of these subtle desires, but by God's grace we can escape their domination.

**4:2.** Verse 2 is difficult to interpret because punctuation was not an original part of Scripture. We must use our best interpretive skills to decide how to punctuate this verse. Compare the punctuation in NIV and NASB. The NIV lists three sentences before it concludes that You do not have, because you do not ask God. The NASB uses two sentences before it makes the same conclusion. Because it seems unduly harsh to join together "killing" and "coveting," we will use the NASB translation: "You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask."

This translation suggests that murder is the result of desiring something and not getting it. It points out that fighting and quarreling are the results of having envy and being unable to obtain what you want. "Lust" is frequently used in the New Testament in a bad sense to describe the act of coveting something belonging to someone else (see Matt. 5:28). "Envious" in this context refers to a quest for position, rank, or fame—an evil expression of personal ambition.

What type of "killing" did James have in mind? James was probably not thinking of physical murder. The Roman government would have executed murderers as criminals. Jesus linked an attitude of hatred and contempt with murder (Matt. 5:21–22). Hatred and jealousy produced by greed and worldliness are potential acts of murder because they can lead to actual murder. The inner attitude is wrong just as is the outward act of murder. Thus, James was not likely accusing his Christian readers of actual murder, but was showing them that their fights and disagreements were as offensive to God as killing.

At the conclusion of verse 2 James outlined the startling truth that his readers lacked what they sought because they failed to ask God. They hankered after satisfaction, but they looked in the wrong places. They did not ask God as Jesus had taught (Matt. 7:7). They allowed their lives to be governed by pleasure, selfishness, and greed.

**4:3.** Here we see an additional reason these believers failed to gain their desires. When they asked, they asked with wrong motives. They may have made legitimate requests, but their purpose in praying was illegitimate. They only wanted to pursue their personal pleasures.

Scripture suggests that God listens to the prayers of the righteous (Ps. 34:15; 1 John 3:21–22). Those who are upright must voice their requests in accord with God's will (1 John 5:14–15). We will not receive prayer answers from the Lord unless we ask with the right motives in accord with God's will.

Experimental treatment removed all signs of the cancer in a few weeks, and the individual was able to return to an active ministry of pastoring. It is a legitimate prayer request to ask God for healing from sickness. Even that request may not be answered affirmatively because God may have another plan for an individual (see 2 Cor. 12:7–10). Our prayers can be a factor in bringing God's blessings to ourselves and to others.

**4:4.** James harshly called his readers, You adulterous people. The Bible describes the act of turning away from God as spiritual adultery (see Isa. 57:3; Matt. 12:39). James charged his readers with spiritual adultery. Friendship with the world describes a deliberate choice to follow the world. It is an act of defiance and rebellion against God. For a Christian, this type of response resembles entering the camp of the enemy and joining his army.

World can refer to the human race, the universe God made, or to a system of values separated from God. In this context it describes a society severed from God and pursuing its own godless agenda (see 1 John 2:15–17). A person cannot be loyal to God and controlled by worldliness at the same time. Christians cannot peacefully coexist with evil.

**4:5.** This verse confirms that friendship with the world and with God are incompatible. Two problems for interpretation appear in the text. First, no verse in the Bible exactly states the words of the verse. Perhaps James was not quoting Scripture but was giving the general sense of a verse like Exodus 34:14 which pictures God as a jealous God.

Second, we must determine whether James was talking about the Holy Spirit or the spirit of a human being. The NIV translation sees James as referring to the human spirit, whereas the Holy Spirit is the interpretation of the Weymouth version: "The Spirit which He has caused to dwell in us yearns jealously over us." Galatians 5:16 describes the Holy Spirit as the opponent of "the desires of the sinful nature." This picture is consistent with the translation of the Weymouth version. James was saying that God's Spirit earnestly desired our undivided allegiance to the Lord.

James was probably asserting that God had placed his Holy Spirit within believers. The Spirit was intensely concerned about any rival in the Christian's heart. Envy intensely translates a strong word describing an intense longing or desire. It underscores the idea that God is a jealous God and allows no rivals. God refuses to share our commitment with any other so-called god. He wants our total loyalty and devotion. It is vitally important for us to remember that God makes great demands of his people.

**4:6.** If God makes heavy demands of his people, he supplies the grace to comply with the commands as the quotation from Proverbs 3:34 (quoted also in 1 Pet. 5:5) shows. The proud are those who turn their hearts away from God to another rival. The humble understand and practice total dependence on God. James assumed that believers, even though they might fall into temporary backslidings, are basically humble in that they recognize that salvation comes from God alone. Believers are recipients of the grace he is willing and able to give.

God resists the proud by opposing the life and practices of those who fail to follow him. He foils their plans and frustrates their dreams. God does not want our lives to be dominated by materialism, a search for prestige, selfish ambition, or deliberate forgetfulness of God. His aim is that we "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33).

**4:7.** These verses reflect the vigor of an Old Testament prophet as they express ten appeals to return to God. Submit ... to God calls us to subject our wills to his control. We can submit ourselves to the Lord only when we recognize that he is greater and worthy of more honor than we. The negative side of this command urges us to resist the devil. Resist is a military metaphor urging Christians to stand our ground against Satan's attacks. We resist the devil when we refuse to surrender to the impulse of sin.

If we obey these commandments, God promises that the devil will flee from us. Christ's resistance of Satan in his wilderness temptations provided the devil no foothold in his life and eventually forced the devil to flee (Matt. 4:1–11).

**4:8.** Come near to God involves approaching God in worship and commitment. Those who approach God in the obedience of worship find that he comes near to them. As our knowledge of the Lord deepens, we learn more fully his strength, power, and guidance for godly living.

Wash your hands uses the language of religious ceremony in a moral sense (see Exod. 30:19–21). We cleanse our hands by withdrawing them from all evil actions and compromises. Perhaps obedience to this command called more for cleansing the outward life, while purify your hearts called for an inner purification (see 1 John 3:3). The language here is soaked with words from Psalm 24:3–4 calling for believers to have “clean hands and a pure heart.”

Double-minded people follow the practices of the world while they pretend to hold to God. Such people lack the purity of heart and focused purpose which the Lord wants in his disciples. The solution for this serious condition is a commitment of the entire personality to Christ and a fresh seeking of the power of the Holy Spirit.

**4:9.** This verse calls for open repentance. To grieve calls for sinners to experience a deep feeling of shame because of their disobedience. Mourning and weeping are the outward evidences of this sense of wretchedness. To change laughter and joy to mourning and gloom demands that we recognize the folly of our actions.

Laughter seems to describe the loud gaiety of worldly people. Their frivolity will become gloomy when they recognize their foolish choices. Laughter and joy are not evil. However, the particular moments when we meet God as sinners demand a serious repentance rather than hilarious celebration. Christians face times for serious repentance. Such times must not be laughed off.

Paul could write from a Roman prison cell for the Philippians always “to rejoice in the Lord” (Phil. 4:4). Under the burden of recognizing his disobedience, he could also cry out, “What a wretched man I am!” (Rom. 7:24). There is a right time to rejoice and a right time to mourn. James called his double-minded readers to recognize their moral unworthiness.

**4:10.** This final appeal contains both a command and a promise. To become humble before God demands a voluntary turning to God (see the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:12). The picture is that of a person who falls prostrate before a powerful oriental ruler, seeking mercy. If we look at ourselves from our own perspective, we will invariably either be flattering or hopelessly pessimistic about ourselves. When we respond with insight provided by the Holy Spirit, we see our unworthiness; but we also sense God's ability to forgive us and receive us. Those who truly humble themselves before the Lord will experience his exaltation and elevation. This “lifting up” involves moral and spiritual power to live this life. It may also provide hopeful encouragement about our glorious future in heaven (1 Pet. 5:6).

**4:11.** Warnings in verses 11–12 grow out of the rebuke of pride and the call for humility in verses 7–10. Verse 11 prohibits slander and insulting language. Pride and the lack of humility are the chief causes of slanderous, insulting language. Slander is critical speech intended to inflame others against the person being criticized. It involves talking against people, perhaps attacking them behind their backs. In this instance Christians were slandering Christians. Christians are brothers and sisters in Christ. For Christians to malign other believers is a living contradiction of the close family ties which should bind them together.

A slanderous Christian must face two charges. First, one who practices slander speaks against the law. The law that a critical Christian misrepresents is the law of love (see Lev. 19:18). Christians are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. The slanderous Christian fails to do this.

Second, one who practices slander judges the law. With a fault-finding attitude I set myself up as a judge. I neglect God's law, thus declaring that it is a bad law and worthy of being removed. God calls Christians to keep the law, not to sit in judgment on it. When we slander our neighbors, we show our opposition to the law of love and imply that we are exempt from observing it.

**4:12.** God is the only Lawgiver and Judge, the one able both to save and destroy. Only God has the ability to enforce his laws and carry out his purposes. He allows no human being to share his role. A slanderous Christian attempts to play the role of God. God has no pleasure in those who practice slander.

Christians can easily come to the conclusion that we are free to show critical attitudes toward those who do wrong. The Bible warns us to leave this judgment with God. Only God has the competence to find and punish those who break his laws. Our calling is to respond in supportive love rather than biting criticism.