

The Gift of Humility

¹ Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ² You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁴ Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, ‘God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us’? ⁶ But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says,

‘God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble.’

⁷ Submit yourselves 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 Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

1. Conflicts and Disputes (4.1-6)

(1) Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? Commentators note that the tone changes at this point in the letter. In the earlier section (James 3.13-18, James has warned about the evils that result from jealousy and rivalry but here the rhetoric sounds harsher and more uncompromising. Earlier in the letter, his correspondents are addressed as ‘brothers and sisters’ but here in verse 8 as ‘you sinners’. James is pointing out the rivalry and conflict which has emerged within the church itself. And yet, in spite of the change of tone, there are echoes of earlier themes in the letter. The ‘cravings’ of verse 1 echo the evil desires of 1.14-15. The ‘warring within’ echoes the wording in 3.5-6, in which the tongue proved so dangerous among the various parts of the body. Similarly, the idea of ‘friendship’ in verse 4, contrasted with enmity, echoes the commendation of Abraham in 2.23. The humble person who receives God’s grace (4.6) parallels the ‘humiliated’ of 1.10 who will be exalted. Although it is sometimes difficult to see the outline of an argument in this letter, the themes and allusions suggest that there is a consistency and coherence about the letter as a whole. **(2) You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask.** The word ‘covet’ is ominous, because the same word (translated as ‘desire’ in James 1.15) is the desire that, once it is conceived, gives birth to sin and untimely death. Note the echo of the tenth commandment (Exodus 20.17) and the rabbinic teaching that one who violates the commandment ‘Thou shalt not covet’ is as one transgressing all ten commandments.. Likewise the focus on ‘asking’ in prayer in verses 2-3 harks back to James 1.5-6, where those lacking wisdom are commanded to ‘ask in faith, never doubting’. Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests that these verses mean that ‘Those who allow their own desire to become their god, must inevitably hate other human beings who stand in their way and impeded their designs’. How do we make sense of desire? How does desire relate to prayer? **(3) You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.** How does this verse harmonize with Matthew 7.7//Luke 11.9 (‘Ask and you will receive’) as well as the parallel in John 14.14. Allison notes that ‘according to Origen, the gospel promises cannot be unqualified: God does not give bad things, nor does God give good things if those praying desire self-glorification. Didymus of Alexandria, developing Origen’s thought, explained: it is like a teacher who declares that he will teach all his students, and yet in the event not all learn; in such a case, no one convicts the teacher of lying. And so it is with regard to the biblical promise regarding prayer. More recently, Brosend has offered this analogy: the saying of Jesus likens God’s response to prayer to that of a parent giving bread and fish; but would a parent give a child a serpent if asked? Of course not, and so likewise God does not respond when asked for the wrong things.’

(4) **Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.** The phrase ‘Adulterers’ is not drawing attention to any specific instance of adultery, but is being used to describe their unfaithfulness. The motif of God as a husband to whom some are unfaithful appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah). (5) **Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, ‘God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us’? ‘But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says,**

**‘God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble.’**

In verse 6, James quotes Proverbs 3.34 (note the emphasis on Wisdom literature). It is a text that accentuates the reversal of worldly standards. But the passage quoted in verse 5 **‘God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us’** is more difficult. As Allison says, ‘This is one of the most challenging lines in early Christian literature’. We don’t know where it comes from and we are not really sure what it means. The NRSV suggests that the writer has in mind passages in the OT such as Exodus 20.5, which refer to a ‘jealous God’, but the Greek, more literally, means ‘God longs for envy...’ Allison makes 20 suggestions about the meaning of this verse, and yet note the emphasis in verse 6 on grace: **But he gives all the more grace.** This is an important accent of the letter, which we should not ignore.

2. **Cleanse your hands! (4.7-10)**

(7) **Submit yourselves 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) Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. (10) Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.** Despite the overall negative context, some hope remains: if people resist the devil, the devil will flee; if people draw near to God, God will draw near to them. Yet a new direction and disposition are required. To draw near to a holy God, people’s hands must be clean and their hearts purified (cf. Psalm 24.4, 73.13). As you look at this passage, do you see any echoes of the Sermon on the Mount (e.g. Matthew 5.4, 5.8) and the Sermon on the Plain (e.g.. Luke 6.21, 6.25). Also the reversal of verse 10 echoes Luke 14.11; 18.14; Matthew 18.4; 23.12. The call to humility unifies chapters 3 and 4. The humble should act peaceably (3.13-18, not curse others (3.8-12), be content with what they have (4.2), and not enter into conflicts (4.1). What are the marks of humility? Rule of St Benedict: 12 steps of humility (the fear of God, restraint, obedience, patience, contrition, serenity, meekness, accountability, *taciturnitas* (James 3.1-18), respect the dignity of others (laughter), discretion, reverence). Given the emphasis on washing hands, here is a cartoon to cheer you up.

