

BRENTWOOD BAPTIST

TRIALS AND MATURITY • HUMILITY AND SUBMISSION TO GOD • JAMES 4:1-17 •
NO DATE

MAIN POINT

When we humbly and selflessly submit to God, it impacts all areas of our lives.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

When have you been most proud of yourself? What were the circumstances surrounding that moment?

In contrast, what is the most humbling experience you've ever had? How did that experience change you?

Most of us love feeling proud of ourselves. Rarely do we choose, much less enjoy, humbling experiences. Yet humility is a key characteristic of a mature believer, and it comes as we deepen our intimacy with God. In James 4, James presents a few different situations that call us to humbly and selflessly submit to God and His design for our lives and relationships.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 4:1-12.

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.

The same power that raised Jesus from the dead 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 4:13-17.

Are you the type of person who loves to make plans, or are you generally more spontaneous and non-committal? Give an example that illustrates your preference.

In what sense can we be prideful in making plans? In what sense can we be prideful in not making plans?

How does thinking about our lives as “smoke” check our pride about our lives and how we live them?

James is not discouraging the keeping of a day-book. Rather, as illustrated in verses 15-16, James is condemning the arrogance found at the root of a person who clings to his or her plans or makes them in such a way that is boastful of their certainty.

This passage provides a Kingdom mindset on how we view and use our time. We are not the masters of our fate. It is good to be organized and to create routines. The danger, however, lies when we become slaves to our schedules. Furthermore, the presumption that we can live by our means and our means alone is an attitude that needs to be cut from the root. Verse 15 reminds us that it is the Lord Whose will reigns supreme. Man can make plans, but the Lord directs his steps (Proverbs 16:9). The boasting mentioned in James is a pride in our time, the belief that we control the time we have, rather than letting the Lord use the time that He has given us. Verse 16 claims that “all such boasting [in our time and our plans] is evil.”

APPLICATION

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

Which of the commands that James gave do you think is the easiest? Which is the hardest? Why?

How would you explain the concept of seeking humility to a non-believer?

Can you think of at least one specific relationship where more humility on your part would help nurture a better relationship? Pray for an opportunity to show humility to that person this week.

PRAYER

Ask God to help you draw near to Him. Ask God to give you grace to live out the commands that James gives regarding humility in your relationships.

COMMENTARY

| JAMES 4:1-17

4:1. Evidently, the peace and peacemakers James wrote about in 3:17-18 were in short supply among these Christians. He pointedly asked: From what source did their wars and the fights arise? The word wars refers to chronic military campaigns, while fights indicates separate battles in those campaigns. In the context of conflict among believers, the words refer to “disputes” and “quarrels;” some were expressions of ongoing hostility while others were temporary flare-ups. We get our word hedonism from the Greek term for “cravings.” It conveys intense desire for what a person does not have. The term “war” has the sense of ongoing military action in which sensuality arrays its forces and moves to the attack in believers’ bodies.

4:2a. These believers kept on desiring and went on failing to get what they desired. The Greek term rendered “desire” means “lust after” or “covet.” It is different from the word for “cravings” in verse 1, but it also has the idea of focused yearning for what a person does not have. James used strong language in an attempt to drive home the seriousness of these Christians’ behavior. When he charged, “you murder,” he probably had in mind Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:21-22, where the Lord taught that hatred and contempt are spiritually tantamount to murder. James was not describing petty differences but substantial and chronic conflict among believers. The sense is probably that these Christians wanted what others had, could not get what they wanted, and continued their hostile attempts to obtain their desires. The Tenth Commandment prohibits coveting (see Ex. 20:17), but Christians were shattering it. The word “covet” conveys the sense of jealousy, spite, and envy—a white-hot zeal to have what someone else has. These believers’ attempts to get what they wanted were being frustrated, so they continued to fight and war (see v. 1).

4:2b-3. These believers did not receive because they did not ask in prayer. James did not suggest that God would give them what they coveted and quarreled over. He well may have meant his readers did not receive fulfillment and satisfaction because they had wrong motives and methods. Their greedy infighting left them empty and frustrated. When these Christians petitioned God, they still did not get what they wanted because their desires were wrong, were not in line with God’s will. The word “wrongly” can point to evil motives. Believers selfishly asked God to fulfill their desires for pleasure. “Spend” has the idea of squandering resources, of wasting them or consuming them by extravagance. The phrase “desires for pleasure” translates the Greek word for self-gratification that James used in verse 1 (“cravings”). God’s answer to selfish, self-serving prayers is a resounding “No!”

4:4. Here “adulteresses” has a spiritual reference, describing one who is unfaithful to God. It probably reflects the Old Testament background of Israel’s committing adultery by idolatry. The term “world” indicates the sphere that is separated from God and dominated by evil. “Friendship with the world”—adopting its values and methods—means setting oneself in opposition to God. The word for “hostility” has the idea of separation. Whoever is disposed or willing to be the world’s friend becomes God’s enemy. Whoever chooses to live in the sphere ruled by evil thereby makes himself or herself God’s enemy.

4:5. Precisely what Scripture James had in mind here is difficult to determine. One suggestion is that he had in mind a verse such as Genesis 6:3, Exodus 20:5, or Exodus 34:14; but he restated it in his words. The phrase “without reason” means “to no purpose.” We might paraphrase the question: “Do you suppose the Scripture does not mean what it states?” God’s Spirit begins to reside in believers at conversion, and His Spirit continues to yearn jealously for their loyalty. With love He intensely pursues their loyalty. The Spirit works in accordance with God the Father’s insistence on having no rivals in their hearts. Thus the Spirit seeks to guide us toward being God’s friends and away from being friends of the world.

4:6. We do not have to continue in a state of bitter, selfish conflict. In contrast to destructive infighting, greater grace is available to overcome hostility and restore relationships. The term “grace” has the sense of God’s free gift and here refers to the necessary power to end chronic conflict with others, renew loyalty to Christ, and relate in love. James quoted Proverbs 3:34 to remind us of the peril of pride and the need for humility: God goes on setting Himself in opposition to the haughty and arrogant, but He continually extends His favor to people who are conscious of their need for His resources.

4:7. Ten urgent imperatives appear in verses 7-10. This extensive call for immediate, remedial action shows the seriousness of the situation being addressed. The first command is “submit to God.” By deliberate choice, these Christians were to align themselves under God’s leadership and be obedient to His directives. In their renewed obedience to God, they were to set themselves in opposition to the Devil. Because of God’s presence and power with them, the Devil would flee from them. Evil would be vanquished from the battlefield.

4:8. In rapid-fire succession James gave three additional imperatives. He urged believers to “draw near to God” for the purpose of offering Him reverence and worship. To do so would strengthen or repair their personal relationship with Him.

4:9. James piled up terms to stress the sincere repentance believers should demonstrate because of their sins. They should be so distressed that they are moved to lament with tears. Their frivolous “laughter” should become lamenting; and their shallow, worldly “joy” should be changed to dejection. Only deep, genuine repentance would lead to the forgiveness they needed to remedy their situation.

4:10. James repeated the emphasis he had made in verses 6-7. He called on these readers to confess to God their sins, weaknesses, and inadequacies. They were to admit their need for His grace and be open to receive it. As a result of this change in attitude, God would lift conflict and divided loyalty from them. He would enhance their relationship with Him, and they would have moral and spiritual power necessary for Christian living. God’s exaltation would be the polar opposite of the worldly prestige, honor, and recognition for which they fought one another.

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.

4:13-17. Do not yield yourselves in-blind confidence to your planning, to go from city to city with a view to traffic and gain, but realize your transitoriness and dependence on God! Otherwise all your knowledge of good will turn to sin and judgment (vv. 11-17).