

THE LETTER OF JAMES – PART 6

CONTRAST BETWEEN GRACE AND DIVISION

- I. Chapter 4 will focus on the contrast between the peace of God and the strife that comes from sin. It begins by identifying the source of conflict as warring passions.
 - A. The idea of the flesh warring against the spirit is found elsewhere in the New Testament epistles. See Rom. 7:21-23; 1 Pet. 2:11. But here the letter goes further and says that the source of strife is that the passions make war among the members.
 1. The letter could mean fighting among the members of the church because of their selfish passions.
 2. But the term members could also refer to the different aspects of each person. See, e.g., Rom. 7:23; 1 Cor. 6:15; Eph. 5:30. In that case, the letter is indicating that, even within the self, sin causes warfare and division that then leads to external strife.
 - B. The letter then presents in dramatic form the consequences of such division, enviousness, fighting, murder and war.
 1. It is unlikely that the Christians were actually committing murder or warfare.
 2. Rather, this dramatic statement about such effects of warring passions could be a description of the human condition generally or of the nation of Israel in particular, or could be using murder and war as an allegory to all anger. See Matt. 5:21-22, 27:18; Mark 15:10.
 3. The overall point is that conflicts are a sign of being controlled by one's passions. Freedom over passions is needed to live in the grace of God. See Matt. 11:12, 15:19-20; Rom. 7:14-15; 1 Pet. 2:11.
- II. The letter then goes on to describe why people experience a gap between what they want to be happy and where they are.

A. The letter first states a point that was perhaps too obvious to be noticed, that the people were not turning to God in prayer, but were relying entirely on their own efforts.

B. The letter then describes why even prayers that are offered are not granted.

1. Jesus had promised that all prayers would be answered, albeit perhaps not in the way expected. See Matt. 7:7-11; Mark 11:20-26; Luke 11:9-13; John 14:13-14; see also 1 John 5:14. The question was why these prayers seem not to work.
2. Jesus had described the success of prayers offered in His name or under His guidance. St. James points out that many prayers are offered instead in a spirit of selfishness, under slavery of the passions.
3. The letter gives the image of spending God's treasures on the passions, and thus squandering them or worse. Jesus had emphasized the importance of using the gifts of God for His kingdom. See, e.g., Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27. The letter is indicating that, if the granting of prayers will not be used, God will not grant them, for it would be worse that useless.
4. James wishes to raise the issue of what treasure we buy with our gifts, that of God or the world. See Matt. 6:19-21, 33.

III. The letter then draws a dramatic contest between love of the world and love of God.

A. The section begins by referring to people as adulterers. In the Old Testament, the Chosen People were often considered like the bride God took for Himself. Thus idolatry would be like adultery against God. See, e.g., Jer. 3:9, 20; Ez. 16:15-22; Hos. 1:7, 9:1. The New Testament picks up on this theme and describes the Church as the bride of Christ. See 2 Cor. 11:1-2; Eph. 5:24-28; Rev. 19:7, 21:9.

1. On a similar point Jesus Himself called the current generation "an evil and faithless generation." See Matt. 16:4; Mark 8:39.
 2. The idea is that to love the world is a form of idolatry and thus adultery (a very severe crime for Jews) against God.
- B. The letter draws a similar point, saying one cannot be friends with God and the world at the same time. The sort of love referred to here is *philia*, i.e. friendship or brotherly love. Jesus had said that one cannot serve two masters, God and the world. See Matt. 6:24, Luke 16:3. Here the emphasis is on friendship, which in the ancient world was considered to be based upon a common viewpoint. One cannot take the world's values and God's as one's own.
- C. This impossibility of loving both the world and God is the basis for the ancient principle that God is a jealous God. See Ez. 20:5.
- D. Developing this point, James then cites Scripture for the proposition that "the spirit He has made dwell in us tends toward jealousy."
1. The phrasing the letter uses suggests that it is directly quoting Scripture. However, those precise words do not appear in any other part of Scripture, or even in any books that were thought by some to be a part of Scripture.
 2. It could be that St. James is paraphrasing Ex. 20, which presents the jealousy of God, who will not have people who worship other gods as well. The additional insight from this passage would be that God has sent His spirit to dwell in us, and that that spirit will tolerate no rivals.
 3. It could also be that St. James is paraphrasing general themes of Scripture. In this case, the letter could be

referring to the tendency (or striving) towards jealousy in the positive sense of the spirit of God excluding other forces. It could also be read in the negative sense of the spirit that God gave to His people now being turned toward jealousy because of human sinfulness.

4. It is also possible that that St. James means for the quote in verse 6 to be the one referred to by the citation of Scripture