

Prayer

We praise You great Creator, Almighty God, for the seasons You have made. By them, You have enriched life with changing colour, seasonal foods, patterns of growth and weather, and a timescale for festivals and celebration. We praise You for all such gifts, and the way in which these enrich life for all people and give us glimpse of Your amazing generosity. Thank You, Almighty God: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Recall several of the 'names' for God used in the Bible. Praise Him for what each name means

On-going prayers

- **Pray this week** about political parties. Ask the Lord to bring integrity to all the due processes of government in your country.
- Pray about the threat to world peace of all kinds of racism
- Give thanks for the grace of God shown to you in everyday life

Meditation

Jesus, You are there:

Dissatisfy my soul with mortal and material things,
and excite me by the potential of Your presence.

Jesus, stay close at hand:

Within this day, break through my mundane triviality,
and bring me the delight of your joy and happiness.

Jesus, keep nearby:

So whilst I travel, enhance my safety, secure my life,
and consecrate my journey by Your company.

Jesus, walk with me:

Then as we speak, lift my soul in spiritual delight,
and inspire me by the power of Your ultimate truth.

Jesus, never leave me:

Melt my stony but damaged heart by love's simplicity,
and assure my flagging spirit of Your eternal care.

Bible Study - James 4:1-6

¹ Where do these fights and quarrels between you come from? Is it not your desires battling within you? ² You long to have something you do not have, so you commit murder; and you are jealous and unable to get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask for the wrong reasons, in order to spend what you get on what you want for yourself.

⁴ You unfaithful people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility to God? So anyone who wants to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think that scripture has no reason for saying that with jealousy, God yearns for the spirit that He has placed within us? ⁶ Rather, He gives even greater grace, which is why it says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'

Review

Throughout James' letter, he describes with cutting honesty the behaviour of people who disturb the peace of God's church, and he justifies his criticisms with words of great spiritual authority and power. Underlying everything he says is his offence at the way some within the Christian community speak about others (3:1ff), and this comes to the fore once again in our passage today, which begins by describing the sordid nature of

'fights and quarrels' amongst Christians (4:1). Most of us will be able to recall incidents within our own churches that resemble what James describes here, though his mention of murder sounds awful and is hopefully beyond what any of us have witnessed! Remember, however, that Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, taught that anger is the seedbed of murder (Matt 5:21f.), so James could well be warning against anger, yet again. It may seem to us that strife amongst God's people is a fact of life, but this passage warns us that it lies behind much ungodliness.

James will have heard Jesus say many times; 'love one another' (e.g. John 13:34 etc). It is possible that this was something Jesus often said, and it must have grieved James to see Christians fighting and quarrelling. He said quite bluntly that those who did this allowed themselves to be dominated by their own desires (4:1), and explained next that the root of such things was selfishness. He took it for granted that the love of Jesus and the love of others should be paramount for a Christian, because it was the heart of the Gospel as taught by Jesus. Certainly, fights and quarrels would not break out in the church if what Jesus said was put into practice. In verse 2, James gives an example of worldly life, in which people commit murder because of jealousy and envy, before switching back to describing the life of the church in the next (4:3). The effect is dramatic; how can the murderous values of the world be allowed a foothold in the life of God's people? James proceeds to the heart of the matter, drawing on Jesus' teaching 'ask and you will receive ...' (Matt 7:7), saying outright that these words had no meaning if people asked for the wrong reasons. Clearly, where selfishness creeps into the life of God's people, the values of God's Kingdom are compromised (4:3)!

James is resolute, and confronts his readers; 'You unfaithful people!' he says, being aware of the 'fights and quarrels' that had split the church in his day. He repeated the general truth that the ways of the world are 'hostile' to God (4:4). Some versions of scripture begin verse 4 with 'you adulterers!' which is another way of saying the same thing. God's people have a 'Covenant' relationship with their Lord like an exclusive marriage contract, so a Christian cannot be wedded to Christ and remain wedded to the 'ways of the world' at the same time (see also Romans 7)!

Verse 5 may sound strange to us, because it implies that there is a scripture saying 'God yearns for the spirit that He has placed within us', but no such text can be found in the Bible. It is best to read verse 5 as James' summary of a number of scriptural texts, put together in this way in order to make the point that God 'yearns' for our total allegiance (see Gen 6:3; Ex 20:3,5; Is 63:8-15; Zech 1:14; 8:2). The effect of this is to remind us that God's love is exclusive, and He demands exclusive love in return. The choice we have is not simply whether to 'believe in Jesus' or not, but whether we are committed to that belief, committed enough for it to change our lives and change our behaviour. This, I believe is the 'greater grace' which James speaks of in the last verse of our passage (4:5), illustrated by his quote from Proverbs 3:34; 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'. Those who are humble and have no personal investment except their relationship with Christ are far more likely to have a faith that makes sense to others than someone who has to maintain an eye on their own material or selfish interests.

None of us can escape the glaring challenge of James' words. To what extent do we allow the world's self-centred values dominate our lives so that instead of maintaining the purity of the Kingdom of God, we allow the Devil back in to create trouble and distress. We can easily point the finger at others, but how good are we at understanding our own faults?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which parts of James 4:1-6 do you find difficult to understand? Can any other member of the group help you with this?
2. How much fighting and battling do you find within the church? Can any of it be justified?
3. Do you feel that you can put your own feelings to one side in order to advocate the Kingdom of God? Or do you simply convey your own thoughts and feelings to others?

Discipleship

Discipleship issue in this text

- *Quarrels and divisions within the church*
- *Godliness and worldliness*
- *The jealousy of God*

Personal comment:

This is a very profound passage of James' letter, and it has great potential as a text for preaching. The way James writes here challenges me to ask myself whether I have any self interests which prevent me from being wholly committed to the Lord and doing His will. This is not a static question that can be answered once, but a dynamic question that remains with me; and I must answer it regularly and whenever the Lord prompts.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Recall those moments of division and unhappiness within the life of your own church and its people. On reflection, are there things you could have done to ensure that everything worked out better and according to God's plans?*
- *Pray for those who feel that they cannot cope with the difficulties within either your own church, or the church at large.*

Final Prayer

How can we thank You, heavenly Father, for the immense privilege of being Your children, knowing that You have given us an eternal inheritance that goes beyond death and grants us a place in eternity! Glory be to You, our Father who is in heaven! Alleluia! AMEN
