



BY DR. JERRY VINES

By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study Series from Jerry Vines Ministries

2295 Towne Lake Parkway
Suite 116 #249
Woodstock, GA 30189

Let's Begin

Abraham Lincoln once said, "Whatever shall appear to be God's will I will do." Is your life so in tune with heaven, you would be willing to commit to a life principle affirming your utter surrender to doing whatever God desired you to do? The title of this lesson is an obvious allusion to James' rhetorical question. After setting the record straight to those who attempt to plan out their lives apart from God's involvement, James asks a question and then answers, "For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away" (v. 14).

Today we will take our journey through chapter four seeking God's direction for our lives. As we make our way through the chapter, we will focus on the outline below:

- I. The Tragedy of a Confused Life (vv. 1-3)**
- II. The Tragedy of a Corrupted Life (vv. 4-6)**
- III. The Triumph of a Crowned Life (vv. 7-17)**

I. The Tragedy of a Confused Life (vv. 1-3)

James opens this chapter focusing on the direction of the believer's life. Unfortunately, far too many Christians are confused concerning God's guidance in their personal lives. James writes, "From whence come wars and fightings among you? *come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts*" (vv. 1-3).

Unfortunately, far too many Christians are confused concerning God's guidance in their personal lives.

The author explains two directions one may pursue in life. On the one hand, a person lives for self-pleasure; on the other hand, a person lives to please God.

James uses terms like "lusts" and "desire." The term translated "lust" is the same term we employ for hedonism. *Hedonism* is the philosophy that pleasure stands as the highest good we can pursue. In other words, life's direction is all about avoiding as much pain as possible and enjoying as much pleasure as possible. Crudely put, *hedonism* is the "playboy philosophy." While it is true pleasure is not evil in itself, nonetheless to make pleasure the highest good is little more than raw humanism, a fleshly malady of our sinful condition. Using pleasure as the highest good, the drunkard is pursuing the "good life" in his drunken stupor. He is, in essence, avoiding pain, and pursuing self-satisfaction. Indeed virtually any virtue can be turned on its moral head when pursuing "lusts." James is clear; our selfish desires bring confusion not only in our personal life, but also into the church of God. Three tragic results follow a life obsessed with selfish living. First, selfish living brings *disruptive problems* (v. 1). As we indicated earlier, our lustful pursuits affect the body of Christ; they infect human relationships. James notes the "fightings and wars among you." The "wars" of which he speaks are not common everyday disagreements which are expected in any



community. Rather James is specifically concerned about explosive, personal quarrelling and contention. He states the quarrels originate “from within.”

While James’ point is that the Christian community is plagued with quarrelling, the origin of the contention is not in the community. Instead the origin is the fallen, sinful human heart. Some question whether Christians may still suffer from sinful tendencies since they are regenerated by the Spirit of God at the new birth. However, the twisted desire for godless pleasure remains a viable possibility for the believer as Scripture clearly indicates (cp. Titus 3:3; 2 Pet. 2:13). In one sense, we are walking civil wars within (Luke 8:14), always contending with the flesh (cp. Gal. 5:20ff). The Apostle Paul spoke of inward contentions and battles with the flesh and mind (Rom. 7:23; 12:1-2). When the believer loses the personal battle with the flesh, his or her loss spills over into the body of Christ!

When the believer loses the personal battle with the flesh, his or her loss spills over into the body of Christ!

Second, selfish living feeds *destructive passions* (v. 2). In other words, it destroys peace within us. The Greek term translated “lust” is *epithumeo*, a different word than James formerly used in verse one. It means “to fix the desire upon”; hence, it carries virtually the same idea as to *covet*, an explicit breaking of the tenth commandment (Ex. 20:17). Neither peace nor contentment characterize the one who covets. Instead, the coveter obsesses himself or herself with having selfish desires fully satisfied. The insurmountable problem is, sinful lusts will never be fulfilled neither in this world nor the next. Instead, one will be trapped in an illusion of deceit, believing fulfillment is but over the next horizon. Even more, not only is inner peace destroyed, but so is community peace. James uses a graphic picture as the result of inner contention—“ye kill.” He is not referring to a literal taking of a human life. Instead, like Jesus spoke about, he is referring to cherishing hatred and envy in one’s heart (cp. Matt. 15:19). Words may kill just as sure as do knives.

Finally, selfish living promotes *defective prayers* (vv. 2c-3). Making pleasure one’s highest pursuit in life plays havoc with our spiritual life, ruining the prayerful experience of the believer. After all, prayer is the means God ordained for the fulfillment of our heart’s desires. Did not our Lord clearly say, “ask and it shall be given”? (Matt. 7:7; cp. also James 1:5). However, if our desires are corrupted with sinful lusts, our prayers will be corrupted with sinful lusts. Hence, the means God ordained for a fulfilling life become infected with the disease of fleshly humanism. Praying in an attempt to control God remains futile and spiritually vacuous. Every believer should examine his or her prayer life by asking a simple question: are my prayers answered more often than not? If not, could it be because our prayer life has been compromised by sinful lusts? A compromised prayer life is the surest way to a confused life.

Reflection Connection

Take a few moments to consider your prayer life. Would you say your prayers are, more times than not, answered according to your requests? Explain.



II. The Tragedy of a Corrupted Life (vv. 4-6)

Not only is a *confused* life tragic since it contains no Divine direction, so is a *corrupted* life. James writes, “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God. Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy? But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble” (vv. 4-6). The Lord Jesus established once and for all the believer’s relationship to the world—*He saved us out of it*. While it is true we are in it, it is equally true we are not of it (John 12:47; 15:19; 17:11, 14). Therefore, to live a “worldly” life is to live a corrupted life. Why? James offers three reasons in these verses.

Reflection Connection

Do you think there exists an unhealthy attempt to so make the Bible relevant and contemporary, that the church has fallen into a subtle worldliness? Why or why not?

First, because of the *sinfulness* of the worldly, our life is tragic (v. 4). In short, worldliness is a distortion of genuine love. James mentions “adulterers and adulteresses,” an obvious allusion to spiritual adultery, a sinful condition often raised by Israel’s prophets (cp. Jer. 3:20). Since Israel was the bride of Jehovah God, their obsession with idol worship was likened to the lustful breach of marital vows. As the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:1-2), the church of Jesus Christ commits a similar breach when she hungers for things other than her Lord. Over and over, God warns us about thinking like the world, acting like the world, and believing like the world. In fact, according to James, we cannot even be friends with the world.

Second, because of the *seriousness* of the worldly, our life is tragic (vv. 5-6a). No act is more disturbing to God than turning from Jesus to the world. In doing so, we are *rejecting His person* (v. 5). If Jesus saved us, then the Holy Spirit dwells within us. Hence, He desires, deserves, and demands supreme place in our hearts. In fact, according to James, He has a Divine jealousy for us (cp. Ex. 20:5). All our devotion should be toward Him in the same sense (and even more) that all the devotion of a man or woman should be toward his or her spouse. In addition to *rejecting His person*, we are *refusing His provision* (v. 6a). God desires to continue giving greater gifts to us, greater than the world could ever afford. He always provides for His own, assuring us ample provision to overcome the world’s advances (cp. Heb. 4:16). Every day the believer lives, he or she receives sufficient grace to meet all possible challenges (cp. 2 Cor. 9:8; 12:9).

Third, because of the *senselessness* of the worldly, our life is tragic (v. 6b). The worldly Christian is a proud, boastful person. He or she brags about “engaging culture” and “being relevant” while blasting believers who attempt to separate themselves from sinful influences. Unfortunately, worldly believers find themselves in a war with God Himself, for He “resisteth” the proud, the pleasure-driven life.

No act is more disturbing to God than turning from Jesus to the world.



III. The Triumph of a Crowned Life (vv. 7-17)

The remainder of the chapter is given to James' focus on the triumphant life. We are encouraged to allow God to lead us on the proper path and purge us from moral impurities. This is the life of victory, a revived life, a crowned life.

In explaining the crowned life victorious Christians live, James colorfully exhorts the believer to follow a series of commands (vv. 7-12). The crowned believer must:

Shape up (v. 7): or, in James' words, "submit to God." Our culture implores us to assert ourselves, to express our own desires and dreams. A famous burger restaurant captures the spirit of this age well—"have it your way." James' call is to surrender. The term translated "submit" was a common term for the military. We must make a clear decision as to who directs our life.

Stand up (v. 7): "resist the devil" James demands. Contrary to our own day, no defense for the existence of Satan was necessary for first century believers; they knew he existed. James implicates him as the "slanderer," the one who "accuses the brethren" (cp. Rev. 12:10). He remains on the offensive, ever ready to attack the unwary believer. Both Paul and Peter had specific, helpful instructions on how to deal with the devil (Eph. 6:13ff; 1 Pet. 5:9).

Move up (v. 8): James insists believers must "draw nigh"; that is, we must come close to God, approaching Him without fear of suffering rejection (cp. Ps. 145:18; John 6:37; Heb. 4:16). As we draw closer to Him, He draws ever so near to us

Wash up (v. 8): James exhorts Christians to both "cleanse" and "purify" their lives if they desire to experience victorious living to its fullest potential. Repentance and confession are routine disciplines for the child of God who walks in the Spirit. In fact, the closer we get to God, the more enlightenment we experience toward our unworthiness in Him.

Sober up (v. 9): James uses provocative images of self affliction, "mourning" and "weeping." Are Christians destined to a life of joylessness and grief? No. Recall Paul's inspired counsel to "rejoice evermore" (1 Thess. 5:16; Phil. 4:4-6). James' point focuses on a genuine sorrow for sin, a sorrow too often lacking in today's believers. Some think because Christ has saved us, there exists no longer either a need to grieve over sin or a command to repent of sin. It cannot be overestimated how mistaken this idea is. Never can Christians become complacent toward either their personal sin or sin in the Christian community.

Line up (v. 10): "humble yourselves" James insists. Humility sometimes wrongly provokes images of weakness and/or the "doormat" syndrome. However, true humility is simply taking one's proper place before the Lord. We get down from our ruling pedestal, allowing God to reign supremely over our entire life. Jesus said those who humble themselves will be exalted (Matt. 23:12).

Shut up (vv. 11-12): James again broaches the issue of improper speech with which he so thoroughly dealt in chapter three—"speak not evil." Talking about



others is attempting to “play God” over them, trying to control them. It is, in effect, another attempt at usurping God’s direction over the lives of His people. A revived, crowned life is one which learns godly ways to speak godly words.

Thus, James offers specific ways to be revived, successful ways the believer may live a crowned life. However, what if we have no certainties concerning tomorrow? What if the sun does not rise at 6 A.M.? What if life radically changes? Note James’ words, “Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what *shall be* on the morrow. For what *is* your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye *ought* to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that. But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil. Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth *it* not, to him it is sin” (vv. 13-17).

Reflection Connection

What safeguards do you have in place to assist you in keeping your focus upon God’s will? Be prepared to share with the entire group

First, observe the picture James draws (v. 13). On his canvas is a travelling merchant planning to peddle his goods on the open market in the most strategic place he can detect. He has a specific time (today or tomorrow), particular place (such and such a city), strategic plan (continue a year), and a projected outcome (buying, selling, and gathering profits). His entire life is before him, neatly packaged on a piece of paper. How is the merchant’s schedule so different from ours today? Indeed we have more sophisticated tools at our disposal to plan ahead than even he possessed!

There is, however, a problem James detects (vv. 14-16). “Come now” he says. Or, paraphrasing him, “Now wait just a minute!” The person in this picture does not understand life nor how God works in life. He fails to comprehend that embedded in the fabric of life is both *uncertainty*—“know not what shall be...”—and *brevity*—“life...a vapor.” The Bible piles up one image after another teaching us these two twin truths concerning life. When we are young, it is as if life crawls like a snail. Yet there comes a time when life appears to gallop away like a speeding thoroughbred.

In addition, James reveals the *sanctity* of life; that is, every step we take should be sanctified by the Lord. He writes, “For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that” (v. 15). James takes the covering off and reveals the heart of our problem—*human selfishness*. The way forward is to acknowledge God’s will and proceed to follow His lead.

Golden Greek Nugget

James asked his readers a rhetorical but significant question, “know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?” (v. 4). The Greek word translated “enmity” is *echthra*, an adjective which means “hostility” or even “antagonism.” It implies a fundamental hatred. James is calling for an unqualified, unconditional surrender to God as Lord over our lives. The alternative is to be an enemy of God.

Wrap Up

In chapter four, we have focused on acknowledging God’s will and surrendering to it. Our lives become so hectic in this day and age we tend to be too busy to seek the face of God. James challenges all believers to consider life in all its fullness, the fullness of which may only be realized when we surrender to His complete Lordship.

