



James

Pleasure, Piety and Penance

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church
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Introduction

In the last lesson we discovered that the fruit of false wisdom was disorder brought on by selfish ambition and jealousy. In this lesson, James sets before us an important question – is our goal in life to submit to God’s will or to spend our life fulfilling our own desires? James warns us that, if pleasure is the principle we choose to live by, there will be divisions and quarreling among us.

James first identifies unfulfilled desires as the source of worldly antagonism, then draws a correlation between desires and behavior when he states, “You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war.” The term “desires” or “pleasures” is the Greek word *hedonon* from which the English word “hedonism” comes. Hedonism is that philosophy which views pleasure as the chief goal in life. James tells his readers that this passion resides in their hearts, waging a war to fulfill desire (4:1-3). He then strongly rebukes the reader for their spiritual unfaithfulness. Rather than yielding to worldly desires, James urges the reader to yield to the desire of the Spirit, which dwells in them (4:4-6). The process of yielding to the Spirit takes place by submitting to God and resisting the devil, accompanied by thorough repentance and cleansing of one's heart (4:7-10).



James 4:1-10

1 What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? 2 You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. 4 Unfaithful creatures! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. 5 Or do you suppose it is in vain that the scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us"? 6 But he gives 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 men of double mind. 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to dejection. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.





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Questions on the Text

Have you ever...

1. Have you ever justified a lust as something God would want you to enjoy?
2. Have you ever been in a quarrel with someone over something you should have asked God for?
3. Have you ever asked God for something only to realize it was your selfishness asking?

Homework

1. What are some of the ways we involve God in the justifying of our indulgences?
2. When was the last time you witnessed or were a part of a quarrel, and how did the respective parties own desires influence the argument?
3. Plato writes, "The sole cause of wars and revolutions and battles is nothing other than the body and its desires." Cicero writes, "It is insatiable desires which over turn not only individual men, but whole families, and which even bring down the state. From desires there spring hatred, schisms, discords, seditions and wars." Can you recall anything from the news that substantiates Plato and Cicero's view?
4. Many people attest that much energy is spent "wanting things," but once a thing is acquired the satisfaction is fleeting and the search for something new begins all over again. Why do you think this occurs, and why do we keep searching on the heels of dissatisfaction?
5. Have you ever experienced jealousy upon hearing that your friend or a family member was blessed with material wealth or public recognition? If so, what do you think the reason for this jealousy was? In what way did your feelings reflect your relationship with God?
6. It could be said that no one has power over us unless they have something that we think we need. Is there anyone in your life with whom you are experiencing tension as a result of looking to them to meet your need rather than to God?



Questions for Reflection

1. James 4:1 speaks of "passions that are at war in your members." "Members" refers to the parts of our own bodies and the appetites that we allow to drive us to make selfish choices. This refers not (as is commonly believed) merely to sexual appetites but to any desires that are "disordered." This can include things like hunger, ease, pleasure, gambling, anger, or even surfing the Web. If we love these things more than we love God and neighbor, we are "at war" in ourselves. Based on this lesson's readings, what steps can we take to bring our members and our appetites back into right order?





Questions for Reflection (cont.)

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2. James 4:2 says, “You desire and do not have; so you kill.” Some people get the idea that James is condemning all desire as intrinsically evil. But this would be more of a reflection of Buddhism, not Christianity. Christianity repeatedly teaches us that it is good to desire things. That is why our Lord teaches us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Why then does James caution us so strongly about desire?

3. James 4:2 says, “You do not have because you do not ask.” Jesus makes it perfectly clear that “your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Matthew 6:8). If so, why do both James and Jesus insist it is important for us to ask?

4. James 4:3 says that we do not receive because we “ask wrongly, to spend it on [our] passions.” This means, among other things, that two people can ask for identical things but with very different hearts. It is, for example, one thing to ask for a new computer because the demands of your job require it and quite another to ask for new computer because you are jealous of the Jones’s next-door and their flashy new Pentium. How can you avoid doing the right thing for the wrong reasons and practice doing the right thing for the right reasons?

5. Once again, James says, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly.” Using the parent-child relationship, what are some ways that children wrongly ask for things from their parents? Discuss how we fall into these traps as adults with our relationship with God.

6. James 4:4 addresses those who wish to be a friends of the world as “unfaithful creatures.” The original Greek says “adulterers” which certainly would remind the readers of the prophet Hosea’s message who likened Israel’s relationship to God as a marriage covenant. With this understanding, how do some marriage partners today try to satisfy their desires outside of the marriage covenant and what is the result?

7. James 4:5 harks back to the language of the Ten Commandments and declares to us that God “yearns jealously over the spirit, which he has made to dwell in us.” To modern ears, a “jealous boyfriend” is one who thinks so little of himself or trusts his girlfriend so little that he is driven to paranoid distraction whenever she is out of his sight. Since such a picture is hard to square with the revelation of an omniscient and all-loving God this passage often presents a difficulty. But the concept of “jealousy” in Scripture is intended to communicate not God’s insecurity, but his fierce desire for our good. He is “jealous” for us the way a great artist is “jealous” to protect his master work from improvements by an amateur or, better still, the way a father is “jealous” to protect his children from the seduction of a drug pusher. In what ways can we “jealously” guard our relationship with God as he is jealous for us?

8. James 4:7 speaks of submission to God and resistance to the devil. One of the devil’s strategies is to attack those who have heard the word and “snatch away what is sown in his heart” (Matthew 13:19). That is, we can often find ourselves distracted or tempted when God is calling us and we discover it takes a certain amount of persistence to listen to and obey God’s word. Have you ever found life getting more challenging and difficult as you try to “submit to God”? Have you ever seen the devil flee in the face of persistent obedience to God?





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Questions for Reflection (cont.)

9. What are some concrete, practical steps you can take to “draw near to God”?

10. The grace of God mentioned in James 4:6 is nothing short of the very life of the Trinity. In light of the radical changes required of us in 4:7–10 how can we participate in the life of the Trinity more fully on a daily basis? How does the Church help facilitate the flow of grace into our lives?



Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder

Pride and Humility

If we are not humble before God, we will not be able to avoid expressing pride — and pride is the root of all sin. James 4:6 therefore quotes Proverbs 3:34 saying, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” What is striking about the statement is its uniqueness in the ancient world. Apart from Judaism and Christianity, not a single ethical system in the ancient world hailed humility as a positive virtue [though some war against “hubris” as a sin]. Following the scriptural lead, Father John Hardon, S. J. declares that humility is, “that virtue without which you cannot acquire any other virtue.” It is the opposite of pride, recognition of the reality of our poverty and creatureliness. “Humility” is derived from the word “humus” which means “soil.” It refers, therefore, to our own honest self-assessment. It does not refer to making ourselves doormats, lightning rods, or dart boards, but rather to a clear-headed recognition of what we are and what we are not. We are creatures who are both “dust” and made in the image of God. But we are not God.

Paul reminded the Galatians of this same truth when he said, “For if any one thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” And again in Romans 12:3, “For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him.” In other words, we are to assess ourselves in relation to God and His grace rather than assess ourselves in relation to the world and its standard of measure. The person who walks in humility will always understand their place in the world because they see their value and contribution to the world in terms of their relationship with God.

Concupiscence

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (No. 418) says, “As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death, and inclined to sin (this inclination is called ‘concupiscence’).” Baptism “erases original sin and turns a man back towards God, but the consequences for nature, weakened and inclined to evil, persist in man and summon him to spiritual battle” (No. 405). In other words, though baptism forgives sin, God has seen fit to let us struggle against the various effects of weakness in our nature which remain even after the sin is forgiven. That weakness, called “concupiscence”, is not the same as sin any more than the weakness after a serious bout with cancer is the same as cancer. Rather, it is an *effect* of sin.





Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)



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Many Christians confuse concupiscence with actual sin. Such confusion can lead to agony of soul and even despair as the confused Christian imagines every temptation he feels is the same as sinning. The good news about concupiscence is that our weakness can be turned into an opportunity to rely on God's grace for help in overcoming temptation. We can recognize in our weakness the same thing St. Paul recognized in this: the word of Christ that "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Still other times, the weakness of concupiscence is an offense, not to our love of God, but to our pride. We become angry at ourselves when faced with our weakness. In such cases, the fact of our concupiscence can be a salutary reminder that we are no better off than anyone else without the grace of God.

Concupiscence, as the Church teaches, is "the tinder for sin". That is, if set on fire by our will, concupiscence can blaze into real acts of sin that can destroy our relationship with God, our family, our friends and society as a whole. But our struggle with it paradoxically marks us as *pleasing* to God. For concupiscence "cannot harm those who do not consent but manfully resist it by the grace of Jesus Christ" (CCC No. 1264).

Doublemindedness

James speaks of doublemindedness twice, once in James 1:8 and again in James 4:8. And a great deal of what he has to say is drawn from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Jesus, for example, talks a great deal about being "pure in heart" (Matthew 5), and James too insists on the necessity of such purity. Likewise, Jesus says we cannot serve God and Mammon (Matthew 6:24) and James cautions that "friendship with the world is enmity with God" (James 4:4). The bottom line, according to James, is that "whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4), and that we therefore must not only pray to God, but we must do so rightly: seeking his gifts for his glory and not in order to "spend it on our passions" (James 4:3). The way to be singleminded is to "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matthew 6:33).

Most of the time, in day-to-day life, humility typically comes through humiliations, because we're prideful. The Blessed Mother was uniquely graced with humility without the humiliations that we often bring down upon ourselves through our pride. This was why, as a teenage girl, she was instantly able to say what the rest of us require a lifetime to learn to say: "be it done to me according to your will." One way of practicing such humility is to recognize the truth of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:7: "What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" But however we cultivate humility, we should do so, not as slaves compelled to capitulate to raw power, (for this only breeds resentment, not humility) but as prisoners freed from the chains of our own folly by one who gave up his life to rescue us. Not a single breath we take, nor a single atom in our bones is anything other than a gift of pure love to us by the God of love who not only made us, but "humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). In short, God does not demand our humility because he is prideful. He demands humility because he desires our freedom and humility *is* freedom.





Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)



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Catechism Connection

Referenced from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

No. 2304 "Peace is 'the tranquillity of order.' Peace is the work of justice and the effect of charity."

No. 2535 "These desires are good in themselves; but often they exceed the limits of reason and drive us to covet unjustly what is not ours and belongs to another or is owed to him."

No. 2536 "The tenth commandment forbids greed and the desire to amass earthly goods without limit."

No. 2737 "If we ask with a divided heart, we are 'adulterers.'"

Family Devotions

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass can be for the Christian a daily fountain of grace. The Vatican II document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* instructs us: "The liturgy, in its turn, moves the faithful filled with 'the paschal sacraments' to be 'one in holiness,' it prays that 'they hold fast in their lives to what they have grasped by their faith.' The renewal in the Eucharist of the covenant between the Lord and man draws the faithful and sets them aflame with Christ's insistent love. From the liturgy, therefore, and especially from the Eucharist, grace is poured forth upon us as from a fountain..."

Rome to Home

A papal quote relating to the lesson:

"The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for: The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. This invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being. For if man exists it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence. He cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and entrusts himself to his creator." ~Pope Paul VI *Gaudium et Spes* No.19.





In this lesson, we observed that:

When we begin to look to man or things to fulfill the desires of our heart, we place ourselves in the middle of a brutal arena -- an arena filled with others who are also looking for the same fulfillment. Rather than viewing our brothers and sisters in Christ as allies in pursuit of holiness, we tend to see them as competitors in pursuit of a pie with limited slices. As Christians we must realize that the desires of our heart are not going to be fulfilled in this world's arena. We must transcend the ways of the world and view our lives, our desires, even our self-worth from God's vantagepoint, which is that of a Father. God is yearning for us to ask him for all that we need, but our motives must be in line with his purposes. James says it this way, God "yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us." The key to receiving in prayer is to enter into the desire of his Spirit. Ask God, "what do you desire for me?" Pray that his desires would become your desires. James repeats a theological premise he asserted in chapter 1: ask for God gives generously (1:5). Frequent the sacraments often for James says, "God gives more grace."

A Message from the Authors

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God Bless,

Scott, Jeff, Mark and Gayle

