



Perfect Law

OUR WILL AND GOD'S WILL

James 4

Teaching Notes

INTRO

These lessons in James are in the general epistle letters—the letters Paul did not write. Paul wrote most of the letters in the New Testament. James was written to believers, specifically a group of Jewish people who, because of persecution, were dispersed. James addressed the letter to the 12 tribes that were dispersed.

James encouraged his readers not to give in to the temptations and trials they would face. He told them to hold on and be patient. James was suggesting that maturity would come and that eventually they would begin to act like Christ, sound like Christ, and look like Christ. The concern was for possible forms of compromise. Wiersbe stated these Christians were “At War with Each Other.”¹

TEACHING

James 4:1-17: Jesus was called the *Perfect Law*. When the believers kept their eye on Christ, they persevered in the law of Christ; when they did good works, they were blessed for what they had done. They were to keep their eyes on the *Perfect Law* of freedom and not wage war with one another. Christ was the One they were supposed to obey. James asked the question, what were they at war about or what was their disagreement about with each other? They waged war with themselves. The reason for the disagreement was because of the cravings within themselves. They focused mostly on themselves and not others. They fought because they wanted more.

The audience was Christian believers. *Nelson's Commentary* used the term “carnal Christians” in describing the audience James was addressing.² They were individuals who believed in Christ but did not reflect His nature. MacArthur stated the people were, “acting in an evil manner, motivated by personal gratification and selfish desire.”³ For James, the fighting, murder, and war were because of materialism. These believers wanted more. First John 2:15–16 stated that individuals should not love the world, because everything that belongs to the world was not from the Father. Fighting over more did not reflect Christ.

James said believers would ask and not receive because they asked with wrong motives (v. 3). They were at war with each other and within themselves because they asked out of a wrong purpose and a wrong desire. *Nelson's Commentary* said, “James responds by suggesting that they were praying for the wrong things. Instead of praying for their sinful desires, they should have been praying for God’s good will for them. Often the reason God does not supply what a person desires is simply that He knows it would not benefit that person (Philippians 4:19).”⁴

James explained that sometimes God did not respond because their requests were out of wrong motives. If there was no benefit in the individual’s relationship with the Lord, then something requested might bring more comfort, but God knew it would not be beneficial in the long run. *Nelson's Commentary* points out, “God is not obliged to answer our prayers in the affirmative.”⁵ God will not act in ways that are contrary to His will, even if we ask in prayer. *Nelson's Commentary* also stated, “In prayer, God does not bow to our will; instead we submit to His good will for our lives.”⁶

The believers in the 12 tribes, whatever they were asking for, were asking for the wrong reasons. The prayers that were for personal benefit were not answered because they would take their eyes off the perfect law of freedom in Christ. Christ knew that about each person.

Wiersbe identifies verses 4–10 as the people being “At War with God.”⁷ Whatever becomes a driving force in believers’ lives that detracts from them focusing on the ways of Christ should be avoided. Any questioning of action or motive could be the Holy Spirit speaking in believers’ lives. The focus should be on the perfect law of freedom. Doing the small things that would make the person become friends of the world could make them God’s enemy.

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament* (Colorado Springs, David C. Cook, 1989), p. 366.

² *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p. 1669.

³ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), p. 1892.

⁴ *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p. 1669.

⁵ *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p. 1669.

⁶ *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p. 1669.

⁷ Wiersbe, p. 368.



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Verse 5 pointed out that the Holy Spirit was moving inside of believers. There was an image of the old nature and the new nature in believers' lives. If they tended toward the old nature, they were turning away from God. God was jealous for His people. The Holy Spirit wanted to move in the lives of the believers, and the Holy Spirit was yearning for more in their lives.

James explained that God gave greater grace to the humble (v. 6). Proverbs 3:34 also points out that God gave grace to the humble. Proverbs 16:18 emphasizes that when mankind functions in pride, it is a guarantee for a fall. Pride comes before destruction. The Israelites took their eyes off God and tried to control their environment.

Verses 7–10 give a list of tangible commands. According to MacArthur, the ten commands include:

1. Submit to God (v. 7).
2. Resist evil (v. 7).
3. Draw near to God (v. 8).
4. Cleanse your hands (v. 8).
5. Purify your hearts (v. 8).
6. Lament (v. 9).
7. Mourn (v. 9).
8. Weep (v. 9).
9. Grieve (because of your sin) without laughter or joy (v. 9).
10. Humble yourself (v. 10).⁸

James was about practicality in obeying the perfect law of freedom and keeping the believers' eyes on Christ. This list was James's effort to help the individuals live out their faith. According to *Nelson's Commentary*, "This primarily refers to one's spiritual relationship with God."⁹ Verses 11–12 are concerning self-exaltation. Verse 13–16 are about a self-reliance. Verse 17 spoke of the sin of omission by stating it was a sin for persons that knew what to do but did not do it.¹⁰

CLOSING

In James there was a process for believers to move from receiving grace to living out their faith. God does not want people to live in the state of their old nature. God wanted these Jewish believers to draw near to Him.

⁸ MacArthur, p. 1894.

⁹ Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), p. 1670.

¹⁰ Thomas Constable, *Constable's Expository Bible Study Notes: James*, p. 88; available at <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/james.pdf>.