

Worldliness in the Church

By Leon King

(An exposition and commentary of James 4:1-17)

1 *From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?*

Does war and fighting occur in the Lord's churches? Yes, they do, we admit with shame. And what is the source of these wars and fighting among God's people? They are spawned from the lusts that war in the members. Lusts are desires. Those desires may be directed in many ways. Such things as pride, envy, covetousness, and ambition are involved in the lusts of men. Lusts may be toward things. Lusts may be toward physical gratification. Lusts may be for recognition or prominence. I believe these wars are best described as stirs, bustling, strife, contentions, and quarrels in which believers attempt to attain the objects of their lusts by unlawful methods, at least at the expense of their own peace.

2 *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.*

James shows, in this verse, the lack of success of many in their desires and pursuits after worldly things. Their lack of success in gaining their lusts spawns more wars and fighting. It seems to me that James is not saying literally that people kill, but perhaps more appropriate is the sin of envy. Envy can take many forms. Sometimes it is directed toward the good and happiness of others. Sometimes is toward another's property. Such envy and covetousness is sinful and only tends to produce more and more of the same. Great stirrings and problems manifest themselves among one another when such things exist. *"Yet ye have not, because ye ask*

not." This is the other side. God's people need to go with him to obtain the desires of their hearts. It is far better to submit to God's will and wait on Him to make provision in His own time. Such waiting provides occasion for thanksgiving to God and praises to Him for the provision He has made, rather than to have fought and "conquered" to obtain the object of our lust. We ought to come to the place where we can ask the Lord confidently for the provision of our needs. Too, we believe, that God at times puts special things in our mind that seem to work for the good of the saints - and for these things, we need to ask; not strive to obtain.

3 Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

We see that some did ask God for certain blessings to be bestowed on them. Apparently such requests were not asked in faith of what God has promised, nor with thanksgivings for the good things that God had done in the past. The prayer is obviously without submission to God's blessed will - there was no right end in mind as the prayer was offered. Such prayers are offered up to God with full knowledge that it has selfishness at the roots. What is the reason for asking and receiving not? It is because the prayer is aimed amiss. It is offered without regard to the will of God, but is totally selfish, that the person praying may consume his desire upon his own lusts. The prayer is that his lust might be fulfilled - that his desire for the object is only to gratify himself. Such requests to God always miss the mark.

4 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.

We think the writer is using the terms adulterers and adulteresses metaphorically. It is to show that they have left their first love and their

commitment to the Lord who saved them, and have fashioned their affections on another, just as a man or woman leave the love of their mate and direct it toward another. In a word, they leave God and set their affections on the world. A love for the things of the world, described as the works of the flesh, will show friendship toward the thinking of the unregenerate world, thereby showing friendliness of the world. That is enmity with God. Why should God's people delight in the company and conversation of the world? Why would we want to conform to the world? When we live in the lust of our flesh, we fall into such a trap. Such a walk is displeasing to God - is offensive to God - is enmity against God.

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. -- Matthew 6:24.

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever. -- 1 John 2:15-17.

5 Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?

No particular scripture comes to mind, which the writer is quoting here, but rather the whole testimony of scripture is exactly as James says. Numerous New Testament passages address this very topic, but these passages tell no different story than what is told throughout the Old Testament concerning the lust of the flesh. The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy. A classic example of that is found in Numbers 11:27-29.

And there ran a young man, and told Moses, and said, Eldad and Medad do prophesy in the camp. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of Moses, one of his young men, answered and said, My lord Moses, forbid them. And Moses said unto him, Enviest thou for my sake? would God that all the LORD'S people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit upon them! -- Numbers 11:27-29.

6 But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.

Grace! What a thought! God gives more grace. Grace upon grace, His blessed bestowing to His beloved ones is a wondrous thing. Grace moves us to humble ourselves - but when we are proud in heart, God resists the proud. We, by his grace, must humble ourselves. It is something we do by His grace. In His grace, as we humble ourselves, He gives more grace. Grace upon grace is bestowed to the humble and contrite heart. James will later say, Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up. Humility is that condition of the heart where a person knows himself to be nothing without the Lord - He knows that without the Lord Jesus and his abiding in Him, he can do nothing. Such a person is meek. An evidence of God's working in us through the Holy Spirit is the quality of meekness.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. -- Galatians 5:22,23.

7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Submission to God is to *obey* Him. Whatever commands He sets before us, we must joyfully submit and obey. We learn obedience by the

things which we suffer. The great commission (Matthew 28:18-20) tells the Lord's church to "*teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.*" The observing of those things, which He has commanded is obedience. Yea, a thousand times over is obedience better than sacrifice. As an illustration, people often substitute what they *want to do* in God's service over what they are *commanded to do*. A person may rationalize that he can best help the church by giving of his means instead of faithfully assembling with the saints, while he neglects his attendance and personal involvement in the work of the church. Another may think he can give his child a "time out" for misbehavior instead of doing what God has commanded him to do. Such thinking is folly. We are to resist the devil. How do we do that?

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world. -- 1 Peter 5:8,9.

Yes, this is the key from another scripture in resisting the devil. We are not told to *rebuke* the devil, but to *resist* the devil. Even Michael the archangel would not bring a railing accusation against the devil - but committed him to the Lord (Jude 9). We are told to resist steadfast in *the* faith. *The* faith is the whole body of revealed truth. In that is obedience to God in everything He has commanded us. We are commanded to pray. We are commanded to assemble. We are commanded to carry the gospel into the world. We are commanded to keep the ordinances. We are commanded to come out from among the wicked and be separate. We are commanded to love one another. The whole of God's word is an explanation of *the* faith. We have the promise of God that when we resist the devil by steadfastness in the faith, the devil will flee from us.

8 Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.

Now we are told to draw nigh to God, and we have the promise that He will draw nigh to us. It is clearly our duty to draw nigh to God. Before we knew Him, He came seeking us and His move was the first one. Now in response to that grace which has been bestowed upon us, we must, in obedience, draw nigh to Him. He will respond in grace. How are we to do that?

*And the Spirit of God came upon Azariah the son of Oded: And he went out to meet Asa, and said unto him, Hear ye me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin; The LORD is with you, while ye be with him; and if ye seek him, he will be found of you; but if ye forsake him, he will forsake you. -- **2 Chronicles 15:1,2.***

*Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return? -- **Malachi 3:7.***

*Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. -- **Hebrews 10:19-25.***

The Old Testament passages quoted above show the same principle that is expressed in Hebrews 10. We understand that we may, in boldness, enter into the holiest place by the blood of our blessed redeemer. We are living in a new and living way - not in the oldness of the letter, but by faith through grace. Our great high priest, Christ Jesus, sits at the right hand of the Father ever living to make intercession for us - our high priest over the house of God - the church of God, which is the pillar and ground of the truth. Let us therefore, draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith - let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering (for he is faithful that promised). And on the admonition goes in this passage. This is an expression of drawing nigh to God. We are to provoke one another to love and good works. We are not for forsake the assembling of ourselves together. We are to exhort one another, and more so, as we see the day approaching. We know we are to cleanse our hands and come before our God in offering up the sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. This is to draw nigh to God. In so doing, He draws nigh to us.

9 Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness.

This is not to be understood that such is ordered in an external way, but internal. Mourning was often demonstrated by an individual putting on sackcloth and sitting in an ash heap In the Old Testament. We need to rend our heart and not our clothes. There needs to be an inward weeping and mourning over our sins before God. The world's laughter and joy of the world need to be turned to mourning and heaviness. What is the weeping and mourning all about? It is about the wickedness and depravity of our own hearts. Carnal laughter and carnal joy need to be excluded from our lives and replaced by joy in the Lord. This does not set aside the innocent laughter that comes to us all. Innocent laughter is lighthearted, refreshing and does good like a medicine. Nor does it exclude the joy of our

relationship with our brethren in the church, nor our families. It must be understood as the laughter and joy of fools in the world.

10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.

When men are cast down, then thou shalt say, There is lifting up; and he shall save the humble person. -- Job 22:29.

For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. -- Luke 14:11

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. -- Luke 18:14.

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you. -- 1 Peter 5:6,7.

This is abundantly clear and needs no explanation. We are commanded to humble ourselves. This is something that we do ourselves by the grace of God. When we do so, we have the blessed assurance that God will lift us up in due time.

There are two subjects in James 4:11-17. The first has to do with speaking evil of one another; the second deals with presumption about plans for our future.

11 Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the

law, but a judge. 12 There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?

What is meant by the term, "speaking evil of one another?" Evil speaking is bringing false reports or false charges; it is pointing out and stressing the failings and infirmities in another. It is a verbal attempt to bring others into discredit and disesteem among men.

Besides our text, the scriptures have quite a lot to say about evil speaking. Note these passages in which evil speaking is directly referred to or alluded to. There is little question that such speaking is sin.

Let not an evil speaker be established in the earth: evil shall hunt the violent man to overthrow him. -- Psalms 140:11.

Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: -- Ephesians 4:31.

Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things. -- 1 Timothy 3:11.

Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, -- 2 Timothy 3:3.

The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; -- Titus 2:3.

Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, -- 1 Peter 2:1.

The person who speaks evil against his brother speaks evil of the law and judges the law. The talebearer and backbiter of his brother takes away from his brother's good name, his character, and his reputation. He takes upon himself to judge his brother's heart and his state. So, in condemning his brother's actions, the evil speaker speaks evil of the law in passing sentence on his brother. In passing sentence upon his brother, he takes upon himself the place and function of the law, which is to accuse, charge, convince, pronounce guilty, and condemn.

In speaking evil against one's brother, the one who does it becomes a judge of the law and not a doer of the law. In becoming a judge, he assumes the place of a law giver. It is the duty of God's children to be doers of the law and not hearers only deceiving our own selves. Evil speaking is but another sin of the tongue, which has already been addressed in the book of James in the preceding chapter.

*And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. -- **James 3:6-10.***

12 There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?

That one lawgiver is not us. It is God. This verse is set as an answer to verse eleven concerning those who presume to speak evil about their brother thereby taking the position of a lawgiver. The one lawgiver, God, is

the only one who is able to save and to destroy. We are to fear the one who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. He is the only one who can save us from so great a death. This reminds the writer of the language in Romans 8.

*What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. -- **Romans 8:31-34.***

Who are we to judge a brother and speak evil of him? Seeing that God is the lawgiver, we are bound to be law doers, not judges. Now we turn to the remaining five verses, which have to do with presuming on tomorrow. Tomorrow may never come for any of us - and if not, then it may never come for some of us. It is certain that we, as mortals, have no promise of another day. We do know that death is sure and that we are all pressing to it. We have no promise of tomorrow; therefore, we must heed the warning of this passage.

13 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:

"Go to now" is a way of saying "look at what you are doing." Those who boast of what they are going to do tomorrow with no reference to God's will make a grave mistake. Yes, men ought to plan. There is nothing wrong with planning, but we must be sure we understand that our plans may be interrupted by the will of our Heavenly Father. We dare not presume that we will be able to carry out our plans apart from the will of God.

14 *Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour that appeareth for a short time, and then vanisheth away.*

Truth! We do not know about tomorrow. What troubles a day can bring - or what blessings can a day bring. Our country has been plunged into war by an act committed on one single day. The snare and the net await men and none of ever know when it will take us. We do not know about tomorrow, nor should we wish to do so. Our life is brief to say the least. It is here compared to a vapor that is here for a short time and then vanishes. Have you ever watched a vapour come from a steaming kettle? It's there for an instant, then - poof, it is gone. So it is with our life. Our days are like a watch in the night when it is past. It is like a tale that is told. It is of few days and full of trouble.

15 *For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.*

For that (for the fact that our life is but a vapour that appears for a little time;) we ought to say, If the Lord will... God's will is what we should desire in all our plans. If His will is not duly considered in our lives, then it is as though we fight against God. It is only as God wills that we continue to exist, move and have our being, and carry out our plans.

16 *But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil.*

Our boastings and rejoicings about tomorrow or this year without due consideration to the Lord and His will are evil. Let us not boast and rejoice in our plans, but let us rejoice and boast in the Lord who permits us to plan, purpose, and to do.

17 Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.

This passage continues in the context of the brevity of our life and the will of God concerning our plans. Knowing to do good is obviously the good of bowing to God's good pleasure with respect to ourselves and our ventures. May all of our purposes, prospects, plans, and workings bring due glory to Him who works all things after the counsel of His own will!