

Covetousness ~ James 4v1-10

by William MacDonald

William MacDonald's sermon on James 4:1-10 addresses the dangers of covetousness and emphasizes the importance of humility and prayer in overcoming material desires.

Duration: 42:52

Scripture: James 4:5-10

Topics: "Covetousness"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the source of conflicts and battles among people, as mentioned in James chapter 4, verses 1 and 2. He emphasizes that these conflicts often arise from selfish desires and lusts within individuals. The preacher gives an example of a missionary study class where a young man passionately spoke about world evangelism, but was abruptly cut off by the chairman. Despite this interruption, the young man's prayer revealed his deep concern for the world's needs. The sermon concludes by highlighting the importance of not being friends with the world, as it is in opposition to God.

Transcript

I'd like to turn with you tonight to James chapter 4, and I'd like to read the first ten verses, James chapter 4, verses 1 through 10. It says, 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 on your lusts. 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 you 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.

Submit yourselves therefore to God, resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners, and purify your hearts, ye double-minded.

Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.

Now, I have read this portion of the word of God for many years, and I don't know how you react to the reading of it tonight, but my impression reading it for a number of years was, well, it certainly isn't written to us. Whatever else you want to say about these ten verses, they're not addressed to believers today, that was quite obvious. After all, it says things like, you lust and have not, you kill and desire to have, and cannot attain.

Couldn't have been written to believers, could it? You kill. And one night I was reading J.B. Phillips' paraphrase of James' epistle, and I really found the Lord dealing with me as I read it. Because this passage came alive to me as it had never come alive before.

And it came straight home to me that the Lord was speaking to us in this portion of the word of God, and especially so in the type of materialistic society that we're living in today. And that's really what this portion has to deal with. It has to deal with life in a materialistic world, and the tendency for even believers to be caught up in that type of an existence.

And so I'd like to look at it with you tonight from that viewpoint, that the Lord is speaking to Christians. Not even to nominal Christians, but to true believers. And you might entitle the passage, Covetousness, Its Cause, and Its Cure.

Covetousness, Its Cause, and Its Cure. In verse one and the first part of verse two, you have the lust for pleasures and possessions, and how it leads to fighting. The lust for pleasures and possessions, and how it leads to fighting.

James says, From whence come wars and fighting among you? Come they not hence even of your lusts, the word there is pleasures, that war in your members. When you first read this verse, you think of the war in Vietnam. And I don't say that that might not be included, but that isn't the primary thought here.

The thought isn't primarily what's happening in Vietnam, it's what's happening on Main Street. And it's what's happening, unfortunately, in too many Christian homes. It's describing in this verse the insatiable desire for more.

And isn't this the type of life that we have about us today? People never satisfied with what they have, and no matter how much our salaries are raised, there are always plenty of things in department stores to gobble up the increase. In fact, go beyond this in a day of credit buying, and extend ourselves beyond what we are able to purchase. He says, Ye lust and have not, ye kill and desire to have, and cannot obtain.

Now just to illustrate this, let me tell you the story about Jane and Bob. Jane and Bob are a typical average Christian young couple. They get married, and they don't really want too much.

They want to live moderately, and on the same level as their friends. Bob has a good salary, and well, they feel that they really should start out with a home anyway, and so they do. They purchase a home.

They don't have the money, but they have enough to make the down payment, and the rest is bought with a mortgage. And unfortunately, the interest rate is kind of high, but Bob's salary is, well, it's sufficient really to take care of the interest and the principal payments. And they're quite pleased with their little home.

When the home was made, there was a space left there, and the faucets were left there for a washing machine. And it wasn't long before Jane really felt that that's one piece of equipment she would like to

have. She would like to have a washing machine, and so they got one on higher purchase.

It was a nice machine, and it was installed there in the house. After they had been married for six months, Bob got a raise, and this relieved the pressure on them just a little bit, that increased income. But at the same time, now that Bob was going up in the company, he felt that he really should have a later model car.

The old car really, well, it was all right. It was in working order, but it was a certain amount of prestige and status in connection with his work in the company. And so he felt, well, a new car would be good.

And it fortunately had plenty of chrome on it. And of course, they didn't have the money for that. They had to buy the car on the installment plan, and it meant that at the end of the month when Bob was making out the checks, he really had to just scrounge a little bit more to get the money together to make all the payments that were being made.

And then, of course, the family started coming along, and every time a child was born into the family, the obligations increased, and there was an increased strain on the family budget. Jane came home from a sister's meeting one day, and she told Bob that she really thought that with all the work she should have a dishwasher. Actually, one of the other sisters had got a new dishwasher, and that's really the thing that triggered it off.

But anyway, she did have more work to the family, and she felt that a dishwasher would be a great help to her, and Bob agreed. And fortunately, right after that, Bob was promoted to district sales manager, and of course, that meant a little more help, too, with their finances. But the strain was telling on Bob, too, because with his increases in pay and with his promotions in the company, he was under more strain all the time, and he decided that really the least he could do, well, he didn't like to be away weekends, because it was nice to be at the assembly, but he had been checking the advertisements for these Johnson speedboats, and he decided that really, to take the pressure off him, it would be nice if he could have a speedboat to go off on the weekends.

And so they did. They had a two-car garage, and one side of it was used for the speedboat for the weekends. And after three children had come along, Jane thought, well, maybe wouldn't it be better if they had a bigger house? I mean, they were probably weren't exactly crowded, but other young couples in the assembly, well, there were some that had a bigger house than they had, and it would be awfully nice if they could.

And by this time, Bob was getting just a bit edgy, because he really had to keep his nose to the grindstone. It was really pretty hard. They just never seemed to get ahead.

No matter how fast he moved up in the company, he, well, I mean, the salary wasn't enough. They were living on credit by now, and all he could do was keep his head above water. And the same was true with Jane, too.

I mean, it seemed her workload was increasing all the time, too, with all the appliances, too, and that seems strange, but a lot of the time they were out of work, and that made it worse than if they didn't have them at all. And the thing that she noticed especially was that she didn't have a car to do the errands with. And so one night when Bob came home, um, she suggested maybe a second car.

She didn't want a new one. An old jalopy would do, but just as long as she could get around easier to do the errands. Of course, that meant added expense with insurance and all the rest.

And there was one other thing that she really did feel was quite important. Most of the others had this, too, and that's something she had never gotten. That was a deep freeze.

And she said, well, they could buy a quarter of beef and save a lot of money if they only had a deep freeze and could put some of these things away. Would help, wouldn't it? And one day a salesman came to the house. Bob wasn't home, but Jane was home, and he was selling encyclopedias.

And he told how important it was, you know, for children growing up today to have an encyclopedia available. And anyway, I think Jane was tired and word weary, and her sales resistance was low that particular day. And when he took out the form, she signed it.

She didn't really realize, well, I think he told her that it would cost about \$200, but it was the down payment that she was thinking of especially. And so Bob came home, and Jane told him what she had done, and he just exploded. I mean, it was just the straw that broke the camel's back.

He said, well, why, why, we need an encyclopedia like we need a hole in the head. And the battle was on. The battle was on, and pretty soon the walls of the house were quivering, and the window glass was bulging out, and the children were in tears, and they wished they were a million miles away.

And there was a strain in that house for the days to come, and some pretty harsh, irritating words were spoken. In fact, that particular night, you could definitely hear the windows of the neighbors' houses closing when the fight was on. Why? Why? What was that all about? James chapter four, verses one and two.

Read them again and see if that isn't exactly what James is saying here. From whence come wars and fighting among you? Come they not, hence, even of your pleasures that war in your members you lust, and have not you kill? Ah, kill! Where is the killing to them? My dear friends, it's possible to kill with words as well as with bullets, isn't it? Have you ever known people living in this world, their bodies kept on functioning but their spirits were gone, have you? Just killed by harsh, bitter words is what it's talking about here. Not necessarily shooting a man down in cold blood, that would be more merciful in some cases, than just this harsh, bitter, acrimonious slaying of one another with words.

And I think that's what James is talking about. You kill in desire to him, and cannot obtain. Cannot obtain! You say, why, James got so many things, and she never got enough of them, and neither did Bob.

Never got enough. Why? Covetousness, that's why. Never satisfied the delusion that a man's life consisteth in the abundance of the things that he possesses.

And what we never seem to learn is that material things don't bring happiness. They bring strife, but they don't bring happiness. I like what David Livingstone once said.

He said he was determined to have no possessions except in relation to the kingdom of Christ. Why, that's good, isn't it? Determined to have no possessions. Maybe I can give you the exact quote, I think I He said, I will place no value on anything I have or possess except in relation to the kingdom of Christ.

David Livingston. I will place no value on anything I have or possess except in relation to the kingdom of Christ. Hudson Taylor used to take an inventory of his personal possessions every year and eliminated all that were not necessary in service for the Lord Jesus.

And I don't know whether it was he or some other servant of the Lord I read of who said he enjoyed the luxury of having few things to care for. He enjoyed the luxury of having few things to care for. We live in our country in a very materialistic society, and it's no different in Australia.

And incidentally, it's no different behind the Iron Curtain either, because although they don't have all of these gadgets, they'd like to have them all. But we live in a very materialistic culture. There never was a time in our country when so many families were being broken up, when the divorce rate was so high, and when there are so many unhappy people rushing off to psychiatrists for treatment.

There never was a time. And of course, if we'd only go to the Bible, we'd know this is true, that the world itself is not big enough to fill the human heart. As Pascal said, there's a God-shaped vacuum in the human heart.

Only God can fill it. It's absolutely true. Material things do not do it.

They do bring strife, and that's what James is pointing out in this passage of the Word of God. The reason for failure to obtain satisfaction. Two reasons are given in verses 2 and 3. First of all, failure to pray.

In telling you the story about Jane and Bob, you'll notice I never said once that they prayed about any of these things. I never made it a matter of prayer whether the Lord wanted them to have it, they just went ahead and got it. And so James says here, you fight in war, yet you have not, because ye ask not, ye ask and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your love.

I personally believe God expects us to pray before purchasing, to make our purchases a matter of prayer. I believe it honors Him. You say, you mean before you buy a pair of shoes? Yes, before you buy a pair of shoes.

God is interested in a pair of shoes? Yes, God is interested in the shoes you wear. You say that in the Bible? Yes, it says that in the Bible. He took the children of Israel through the wilderness.

There were no Safeway stores in the wilderness. He fed them all the way and provided them with shoes that never wore out. I haven't been able to find those in the stores yet, but God provided His people with them.

Shoes, and if God's interested in the clothes that you wear, the shoes that you wear and the hat that you buy, He's interested. And I believe if we take these things to the Lord in prayer, we can see God's hand in a marvelous way. I've bought batteries for the car, shock absorbers for the car.

In answer to prayer, I just happened to get there at the time when they were on sale. Little things like that might not have meant anything to anybody else, but they meant a lot to me because I saw the timing of God in little things like that. Last time I went to buy shock absorbers for my car, the lady who sold them to me said, My, you're getting these for two dollars cheaper each.

I said, How come? She said, They're on sale today. I said, Thank you very much. I had prayed about it the night before.

I had no idea they were on sale. We fail to pray, or if we pray, sometimes we pray with false motivation, mixed motives, and God even sees through that. God even sees through that and deals with us accordingly.

Now in the next verses, verses four and five, James speaks of this covetousness as a form of worldliness. That isn't what we think. When we think of separation from worldliness, we never think of covetousness, but that's what it's spoken of here.

It says in the origins, Ye adulteresses. First of all, this spirit of covetousness is described as spiritual adultery. My Jane and Bob would really have been surprised if you had mentioned that to them.

They really would have been shocked if you had said to them, Jane and Bob, you're guilty of spiritual adultery. I think they'd have gone off in a speedboat next weekend instead of coming to the meeting. That's what the Bible says.

It calls this form of covetousness as insatiable desire for more adultery. Why? Because it takes God off the throne in your life and puts things on in his place. That's why.

That's exactly what Bob and Jane were doing. They were living for a world of things and preoccupied with material things. This is where their thoughts were, and it finally burst in a grand war.

The second thing, he describes it as friendship of the world. Ye adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world. That's strange, isn't it? You don't think of that when you interview a person for fellowship.

That's what it is. Friendship of the world. Why? What is the world? Worldliness essentially is the love of passing things.

That's what worldliness is. It's the love of passing things. And so James is right here when he says, friendship of the world.

And then the third thing he describes is enmity with God. Enmity. Pretty strong language.

Yes, it is strong language. And it's shocking that this language is used as descriptive of Christian people. It just shows you the kind of a rat race we can get into today when we get our eyes off the things that are eternal and get them occupied with the passing show, with the vanity fair.

And then he speaks of it as enmity with God, and then in the next verse, verse five, he says it's contrary to the scriptures, and it's contrary to all that the Holy Spirit would have in our lives. Now, verse five is obviously a very difficult verse, as you know, and has many different interpretations. I'll give one or two.

It says, Do you think that the scripture speaks in vain when it says, the spirit that dwells in us lusts to envy? Well, first of all, we know that the scripture doesn't speak in vain, and we know that this whole attitude of covetousness is contrary to the scriptures. Now, do you think the scriptures speak in vain when they say, the spirit that is in us lusts to envy? You may think of it this way. Do you think that the scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit leads a person to be covetous like this? Of course, it doesn't.

Or lust to envy means that the Holy Spirit in us craves our total and complete devotion to the Lord and not to material things. You may see the verse in two ways. First of all, the denial that the Spirit of God could be the source of this type of behavior, or secondly, as an affirmation that when the Spirit of God lusts in us, he

is jealous of our devotion to the Lord in a good way, in a good jealousy.

Then in verses six through ten, the Lord tells Jane and Bob what they should do in a situation like this. My, the Bible is really a practical book, isn't it? Coming down to us right where we are in the twentieth century. Maybe by now, if Jane and Bob have studied this passage of scripture, and they say, my, that's just us.

It's just a mirror of what we've been going through. And they say, what are we going to do? Well, maybe they're discouraged, and they say, what's the use? And so Jane says in verse six, but he giveth more grace. He giveth more grace, wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.

In other words, Jane and Bob, if you come to the place in your life where the Lord puts his finger on something, don't fight against it. Just break under the hand of God. The tendency with too many of us is to grit our teeth and just to plunge on and refuse to be broken before the Lord.

This says, God knows how to resist the proud. It is a wonderful thing that the great God in heaven himself, he cannot resist the brokenhearted. That's a wonderful thing, isn't it? Powerful as he is, he doesn't have the power to resist a brokenhearted soul, and he gives grace to the humble.

So Jane and Bob, don't give up. Maybe the walls of your home are quivering with tension and friction and fighting and all the rest, and it's all come in because of covetousness and unsatisfied, but don't give up. There's a way out, and here's the way, and there are certain steps in the way.

The first step is this, in verse 7a, submit yourselves therefore to God. What does that mean? Well, I think it means to get down before the Lord and say, Lord, we know you're speaking to us. We know you're speaking to us.

We do know, don't you? I do. When I'm in a meeting and the Spirit of God comes along and he puts his finger in something in my life that isn't right, and I swallow hard, I know that the Lord is speaking to me. What am I going to do? Well, the thing to do is just to, in that moment, just to break before the Lord and say, Lord, here I am.

Speak to me. Tell me what you want in my life. And so that's why the first thing that Bob and Jane should do is just get before the Lord, and as I say, break before the Lord.

Brokenness is something we don't hear too much about. In fact, I was brought up in a Scottish family, and my brokenness was a sign of terrible weakness. You know, Scottish is supposed to be doer and never show any emotion at all.

Pardon me if there are any Scottish people here. But you know, there are these national characteristics ingrained in us of the scriptures that say, Admit yourselves, therefore, to God. That's the first thing.

Then, as soon as you start to do that, and be soft before the Lord, and just be like clay in the hands of the potter, and somebody's voice comes to you. It's the voice of the devil. And I said, look, you mustn't do that.

Don't be a fool now. Don't make a fool of yourself. The devil.

And I think that's why it says next here, resist the devil, and he will flee from you. In fact, with Jane and Bob, there might be the tendency for Jane to say, well, I'm not going to give up. After all, I was right in this thing, and Bob's saying, well, I'm not going to give up either.

After all, who's been footing the bill? And the devil will say to both of them, that's right, go at it. You're both right. The scriptures say, no, Jane and Bob, submit yourselves to God, and resist the devil when he comes to you with all this kind of insidious talk.

Then what does it say to do, sir? It says, draw nigh to God. He will draw nigh to thee. How does that, what does that mean? Well, I only know one way of drawing nigh to God, and that's in prayer.

Isn't that right? Okay, first thing you do is break before the Lord, resist the voice of the devil when he tells you to be proud and unrelenting and unforgiving. Just resist him, and then just get down before the Lord. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to thee.

Isn't that nice to know that in that home with Jane and Bob and the crying children, the warring parents and the crying children, that the Lord is waiting in heaven, waiting for them to get down on their knees, and then in a very real way, he'll draw nigh, and he's not too near right now. He's watching, but he has to separate himself from that kind of a situation. Draw nigh to God, he will draw nigh to thee.

What else does it say? Well, the next thing it says, cleanse your hands, ye sinners, and purify your hearts, he double-minded. The hands speak of our acts, and the heart speaks of our motives. How do you cleanse your hands and purify your hearts? Only one way I know, and that's by confession of sin.

Confession of sin. Confession and putting away of sin. And practically what it means is for Jane and Bob to get down on their knees and say, Lord, we're really in a backslidden condition.

We've put things on the throne in our lives, and we've taken you off the throne, and we've got away from the Lord, and our house, our home is in shatters as a result of it, and we're coming to you and we're just confessing our sin, and we're putting it away. We're going to end this mad business of accumulating material things, and we're going to be satisfied with a modest standard of living so that we can devote ourselves more wholeheartedly to the work of the Lord. Confession and forsaking of evil acts and motives.

Cleanse your hands, ye sinners, and purify your hearts, ye double-minded. What else? Deep sorrow for sin. Deep sorrow for sin.

Verse nine says, Be afflicted and mourn, and weep. Let your lot to be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. And finally, an utter humbling of selves before God.

Verse ten. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up. Let me just go over those again.

What is the cure for covetousness in the home of Jane and Bob? Well, the first thing they should do is just submit themselves to the Lord and say, Lord, you've been speaking to us, and we hear your voice, and we want to hear it still. The second thing they should do is resist the devil as he comes to them and tells them not to break, not to be soft, not to confess. After all, you were right.

And then the third thing is to approach God in prayer, and the promise is he will draw nigh to you. The fourth thing is confession and forsaking of evil acts and motives. The fifth is deep sorrow for sin, and the last is an utter humbling of self before God.

The cause and cure of covetousness. Now, I'd just like to say that I was brought up in assembly fellowship, an assembly just like this one, and you know that in all my life in assembly fellowship, I have

never known the people of God to come before the Lord in confession of sin and humbling of ourselves before God. It's a strange thing, isn't it? I'm not saying it hasn't happened.

Probably some of you have had it happen, but I've never had it happen. I've never been in a meeting where the Christians have really wept before the Lord confessing sin and failure. We don't do it in my assembly.

I sometimes think the reason we don't do it is that visitors might come in and find out we're not perfect, and the sooner they find it out, the better. And yet I do know this, that there never has been a revival among God's people apart from these steps that are listed here in James. Isn't that strange? I've never heard of a revival even among the people of God that was not preceded or accompanied by this.

And I believe that this is what we really need today. I can remember a meeting in Chicago. It was a missionary meeting, missionary study class, and of all the meetings I've ever attended in my life, I have never been so conscious of the voice of God speaking as that night.

And I've never been in a meeting where so many people were in tears. I'd like to tell you about it. I'll tell you what happened.

It was a missionary study class. There were four speakers. That's enough to kill any missionary study class.

It didn't kill this one. The last speaker was a young man devoted to the Lord Jesus, a true disciple of the Lord Jesus, and he got the platform at 8.30 and was supposed to speak until 9. And that young man got up, and for that time he poured out his soul in the most impassioned plea for world evangelism that I've ever heard in all my life. And you could have heard a pin drop in that meeting.

The Spirit of God was really moving on hearts in that meeting. I can remember some of the things he said. He said, there are a lot of things in the Bible I don't understand, but those aren't the things that bother me.

He said, it's the things I do understand that bother me. And I remember him holding up a book, a communist book that he bought for 35 cents in Vienna, a beautifully bound book setting forth communism. He was showing what the communists are doing today and how we're asleep at the switch.

And oh, God was really working. And all over the audience you could hear people weeping while the meeting was going on. God was speaking.

At 9 o'clock, the chairman got up and handed the young man a note. And you know what the note said. It said, brother, your time is up.

One of the worst things I've ever seen happen in a meeting. The dear young brother looked down at the note. Nobody would have cared if he had gone on for two more hours.

Nobody would have cared. But listen, the meeting stops at 9, everybody has to get home, and so there you go. So he looked down at the note, and very graciously he brought his message to a close, and he said, let's pray.

And he started to pray, and as he prayed, it seemed the world with all its need came before him, and he started to weep. And he wept so uncontrollably that he couldn't continue his prayer. I've never been in a meeting like this.

If it had been put on, you'd have known it wasn't put on. And then he said, let's pray silently. And he put his handkerchief up to his mouth, and all you could hear was that dear fellow's muffled sobs over the PA system.

He finally regained his composure. He closed his prayer, and he got down and sat on the front seat, and put his head between his knees, and wept. In fact, he wept for a half hour.

The reason I know is I sat beside him. When he got down, the chairman made his second mistake. He said, let us sing hymn so-and-so.

Usually a hymn is very much in keeping at the end of a meeting, and very, very appropriate. But that night, one of the worst things he could have done was give out a hymn. Nobody, repeat, nobody wanted to sing.

So the song leader got up, and instead of getting up on the platform, he stood down there. His face was ashen. He stood there long enough to sing the first line of the first verse, and he sat down.

And all I could think of was the glory of the Lord so filled the place that the priest couldn't minister. And then the meeting was dismissed, and everyone went home, and the dear brother sat there and wept. Why was he weeping? Well, I believe he was weeping because God had spoken, and we, God's people, weren't ready to break before the Lord.

We had to just stay there and have a time of confession and forsaking of sin, because we just don't do it, do we? I like to tell one of the other parts of the story. Some months later, I got a letter from a fellow who had been in that meeting. He had been with me in the Navy in the Second World War, and he was in that meeting that night, a fine Christian fellow.

And he wrote me a few months later, and he said to me, Dear Bill, my life has never been the same since the missionary study class. He said, Oh, the bitter, bitter regrets. But maybe God can still salvage something from my life for His glory.

And shortly after that, he packed up his bags and, with his wife and three children, went down to serve the Lord in Brazil as missionaries. That was one of the byproducts of the meeting. Another thing that happened is some of the EMEA students took an unsaved friend out to the meeting that night, Judy Ramisetti.

Judy Ramisetti sat in the meeting that night, and dear friends, I tell you, not a word of gospel was preached. But at the end of the day, you can be saved. Can you be saved when no gospel is preached? Yes.

If the Spirit of God is moving, you can be saved whether any gospel is preached or not. But I'll never forget the sadness, the pathos of the situation that God really spoke that night. And except in individual cases, we really weren't ready to hear, to break before the Lord.

I wonder if Jane and Bob were willing to do it. If when the Lord brought them to that crisis in their lives, if they were willing to stop accumulating and start forsaking, put away this terrible lust for covetousness, lust for things, and start just living a life of discipleship before the Lord.

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