WHAT DO YOU DESIRE?

In a world where it’s easier to blame everyone and everything else, James begins chapter 4 by dismantling that mindset entirely: Where do all of the issues come from? You. Worldly problems being solved in a worldly way will never be fixed. But the issue is never the fruit; it’s the root.

James could have described his listeners a few different ways, but he chooses to use the label of someone who is unfaithful to their spouse, often in a very intimate and personal way. It is spiritual adultery to seek the affections of the world while claiming intimacy with God. Friendship with the world cannot be held in tandem with closeness with God; it is not, “should not,” but cannot. Where someone is investing, pouring their desires, and focusing betrays where their loyalties lie, even if their words say something different.

One does not even need to be successful in the world to turn one’s back on God. James says, “Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4; emphasis supplied). It is possible to look like a God follower on the outside and yet desire something else entirely on the inside. The self-diagnosis questions, then, are: What do you really want? Where are your desires leaning? And where are you encouraging them to go?
Write out James 4:1–10 from the Bible translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out James 4:4–7. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
GETTING WHAT YOU WANT

James doesn’t hold back even from the onset of chapter 4: battles, wars, and fights arise because of a focus on and a drive for the fulfillment of pleasures. The listeners aren’t told what these “pleasures” are, but they are told how they’re trying to obtain them: by lusting, murdering, coveting, and fighting. Even legitimate and healthy desires can be turned into something terrible when gone after in the wrong way; desiring a deep connection with another human is legitimate and God-given, but seeking it by stalking is neither. Desires for unhealthy or downright sinful experiences take it a step further by being harmful in both the end and the means.

All the worldly ways of gaining simply do not work. Lusting and coveting build a sickening desire for something, while murdering and fighting seek to take things by force and violation of someone else. These ways of gaining something appeal to the carnal heart because they lend a semblance of control and accomplishment. But it is all smoke and mirrors.

When one is seeking to gain in such ineffective ways, James asks, Where is God? Going about gaining access to pleasures in such reckless ways betrays a deep distrust in God. Why not simply ask Him? The believer should trust Him to provide and to give what is needed. Often, though, God is far from the minds of even those who confess allegiance to Him.

Sometimes someone will pray to God, ask for what they want, and they won’t get it. Does that mean God wasn’t listening? There are several reasons for unanswered prayer, and James provides one explicitly here: “You ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:3). If God were to fuel the hedonistic pleasures of His children or enable them to further invest in broken cisterns, it would violate the law of love. How could He encourage His children to seek out what will never satisfy, will only harm, will only lead to wanting more of the same vapor? Sometimes God says “No” because He knows saying “Yes” would only lead to harm. It’s easy to misunderstand God when prayer is seen as using God as a vending machine or a similar transactional relationship. Prayer is not about strong-arming God and bending Him to our will—it is about surrendering to His will, learning to trust Him more, and allowing Him to change us.

The humble surrender of prayer is a far cry from the murdering and lusting that the world recommends to get what one wants. Then again, God always does seem to have a non-worldly way of doing just about everything.
ENCOURAGED BY LAMENTATION

The first half of James 4:8 is likely to be on cross-stitched pillows and wall hangings: “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” It is both an invitation and a promise, one that reminds us of God’s desire to be with His people in an intimate way. The second half of the verse, though, is less known and less cross-stitched: “Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded” The following verse further encourages the reader to “lament and mourn and weep!” (v. 9). Why are these parts of verses 8 and 9 less known?

When these harsher-sounding sentences are taken out of context, they can be misconstrued to mean some unbiblical things: We must cleanse our own hearts and minds before coming to God; He does not like joy in His presence; laughter is disrespectful; godly Christians should be full of mourning and gloom. Though silly to some, these are real conclusions that others have drawn from verses like these.

Instead of lifting them from the page, they’re better understood in context. What is James talking about? Submitting to God, resisting the devil, and drawing near to God. While here—in surrender to God and in nearness to Him—a sense of personal sinfulness is inescapable. Ellen White writes that “the closer you come to Jesus, the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes; for your vision will be clearer, and your imperfections will be seen in broad and distinct contrast to His perfect nature. This is evidence that Satan’s delusions have lost their power; that the vivifying influence of the Spirit of God is arousing you.” How should one respond to this? In humility, in doing one’s part in being cleansed (putting away certain habits and experiences, asking God to change one’s heart), in lamenting and mourning one’s sinful condition (putting away laughter and joy that does not stem from godly pleasures). Lamenting, mourning, and weeping are common experiences throughout the Bible that are connected with a recognition of one’s dismal situation, deep repentance, and a desire to turn back to God (Jer. 49:3; 4:28; Ezek. 7:27; Isa. 22:4; and the book of Lamentations). Throughout the Old Testament, prophets would encourage the people to lament, mourn, and weep, because this would be the first step in seeing reality and then being reconciled to God. Out of context, these verses can seem discouraging; but this experience is irrefutable evidence that the delusions of sin are fading and giving way to clear sight and a deeper surrender to Christ.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Matthew 7:7
1 John 2:17
1 John 5:14, 15
Romans 5:15
1 Peter 5:8
Proverbs 3:34

What other verses come to mind in connection with James 4:1–10?

Review your memorized verse from James 4:1–10.
THE YEARNING SAVIOR

After emphasizing the impossibility of simultaneous friendship with the world and God, James articulates why this is: “Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, ‘The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously?’” (James 4:5). The Holy Spirit fiercely woos the heart that He is invited into. God does not want to share the throne of anyone’s heart. He yearns jealously. Using the analogy of adultery, God is deeply betrayed and torn by a divided heart in His child. The inner suffering of a faithful spouse when betrayed is mirrored and amplified in the Spirit of God when His children have world-loving hearts.

Jesus expressed this deep yearning for His people when He lamented over Israel: “‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!”’” (Matt. 23:37–39). He acknowledges at the beginning their betrayal: they have even scorned and killed the messengers seeking to reconcile them with their King. Jesus yearns for their hearts, to protect them. But by their own actions and hearts they have chosen a desolate house and to not see His face again until their choices are not changeable.

Does the Spirit simply yearn and then leave it to humanity’s weakness to make a change? No, “but He gives more grace” (James 4:6). The Spirit of God does not leave humanity stranded with contrary hearts. He gives grace—that wonderful grace secured by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus!—for surrender and a change wrought by His power. With Charles Spurgeon, we should “[n]ote that contrast; note it always. Observe how weak we are, how strong he is; how proud we are, how condescending he is; how erring we are, and how infallible he is; how changing we are, and how immutable he is; how provoking we are, and how forgiving he is. Observe how in us there is only ill, and how in him there is only good. Yet our ill but draws his goodness forth, and still he blesseth. Oh! what a rich contrast!” (“More and More,” in The Complete Works of C. H. Spurgeon, vol. 61.)

If His children would only acknowledge the reality of their need, He will send all the grace needed and more. This grace leads His child to submit to God and resist the devil, and the devil will flee, knowing that he is no match (v. 7). Humans cannot resist the devil in their own strength; submission to God is paramount and primary. And God gives the grace for even this.
SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE

By the one who had revolted in heaven the kingdoms of this world were offered Christ, to buy His homage to the principles of evil; but He would not be bought; He had come to establish a kingdom of righteousness, and He would not abandon His purpose. With the same temptation Satan approaches men, and here he has better success than with Christ. To men he offers the kingdom of this world on condition that they will acknowledge his supremacy. He requires that they sacrifice integrity, disregard conscience, indulge selfishness. Christ bids them seek first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; but Satan walks by their side and says: Whatever may be true in regard to life eternal, in order to make a success in this world you must serve me. I hold your welfare in my hands. I can give you riches, pleasures, honor, and happiness. Hearken to my counsel. Do not allow yourselves to be carried away with whimsical notions of honesty or self-sacrifice. I will prepare the way before you. Thus multitudes are deceived. They consent to live for the service of self, and Satan is satisfied. While he allures them with the hope of worldly dominion, he gains dominion over the soul. But he offers that which is not his to bestow, and which is soon to be wrested from him. In return he beguiles them of their title to the inheritance of the sons of God.

Satan had questioned whether Jesus was the Son of God. In his summary dismissal he had proof that he could not gainsay. Divinity flashed through suffering humanity. Satan had no power to resist the command. Writhing with humiliation and rage, he was forced to withdraw from the presence of the world’s Redeemer. Christ’s victory was as complete as had been the failure of Adam.

So we may resist temptation, and force Satan to depart from us. Jesus gained the victory through submission and faith in God, and by the apostle He says to us, “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.” James 4:7, 8. We cannot save ourselves from the tempter’s power; he has conquered humanity, and when we try to stand in our own strength, we shall become a prey to his devices; but “the name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.” Proverbs 18:10. Satan trembles and flees before the weakest soul who finds refuge in that mighty name. (Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages, 130, 131.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How have you experienced “wars and fights” as a result of desires for pleasures?

What does it practically mean and look like to desire friendship with the world?

How does the world tell you to accomplish and/or gain things? Give some concrete examples. How does God’s Word compare with those instructions? Be specific.

How can you pray for things that you want in a biblical way?

Think of a time that mourning was good for you. Describe that experience and what you can learn from it.

How does knowing that God “yearns jealously” for you affect your life?

How can we want to be friends with God instead of the world and not just look like it?