

The Book of James, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: Friendship with the World

James 4:1–10

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The doctrinal core of this lesson is the impossibility of divided loyalty between God and the world, and the necessity of humble repentance to receive grace. James teaches that our conflicts arise from disordered desires within, that friendship with the world is spiritual adultery and enmity with God, and that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. This connects to Jesus's teaching that no one can serve two masters and to John's warning not to love the world. Help students see that the issue is not that they have desires but that their desires have become rulers, and that the call is not merely to behave better but to return to God in humble repentance and undivided devotion.

There is rich teaching here on the nature of God's love and grace. James presents God as jealous in the holy, covenantal sense, yearning over us as a faithful husband yearns for an unfaithful spouse, and yet as the God who gives more grace, opposing the proud but lavishing grace on the humble. This guards against two errors: presuming on grace while remaining proud and worldly, and despairing as though our unfaithfulness has placed us beyond grace. The ten commands of verses 7 through 10 lay out a genuine path of repentance, submitting to God, resisting the devil, drawing near, cleansing, mourning over sin, and humbling oneself, with the gracious promise that God will draw near and lift up. Keep in view that repentance is part of the believer's ongoing walk, not a one-time event, consistent with a faith preserved through humble obedience.

Formationally, this lesson reaches into the hidden drivers of our conflicts and the divided loyalties of our hearts. Your aim is to help students trace their quarrels to their cravings, examine their prayer lives and their friendship with the world, and respond to the call to humble themselves and draw near to God. The tone should be searching, since James names spiritual adultery plainly, and deeply hopeful, since the passage overflows with the promise of more grace to the humble. Teach the truth clearly, and let it draw students home to a jealous, gracious God.

Question 1

Student Question:

James asks, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?" (vv. 1–2). What is James teaching about the true source of our conflicts, and why is it significant that he locates it in our own desires rather than in other people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

James opens chapter four with a penetrating diagnostic question about the conflicts among believers: “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?” His answer cuts past the surface: “Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” The wars between people begin with a war inside each person.

Help students grasp the significance of locating conflict in our own desires rather than in others. Our instinct in conflict is always to blame the other party, the circumstance, the offense. James turns the mirror around: the fights out there are fueled by cravings in here. This does not mean others never wrong us, but it exposes our own contribution we prefer to ignore.

Explain the phrase “passions are at war within you.” The word suggests pleasures or cravings that have become demanding rulers. When we must have something, comfort, control, respect, possessions, and someone or something blocks it, conflict erupts. The unmet craving turns into a quarrel.

Apply it honestly. Most of our conflicts, if traced to their root, reveal a desire we have absolutized: I must be respected, I must be right, I must have my way, I must be secure. Naming the craving beneath the conflict is the first step toward peace, because it moves us from blaming others to examining our own hearts before God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Conflict as arising from disordered desires within, not merely external causes.
- The tendency to blame others while ignoring our own cravings.
- Desires becoming demanding rulers that drive quarrels.
- Self-examination of the heart as the first step toward peace.
- The internal war of the passions as the root of external strife.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does James locate conflict in our desires rather than in others?
- What does it mean that our passions are at war within us?
- How does naming the craving beneath a conflict move us toward peace?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think of a recent conflict in your life. If you trace it honestly to its root, what desire of your own, to be right, to be in control, to be comfortable, to be respected, was driving it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to trace a real conflict to its root desire. Encourage them to pick an actual recent conflict and follow it down past the surface issue to the craving underneath.

Offer common roots to help them: the desire to be right (so being contradicted feels intolerable), to be in control (so uncertainty breeds anxiety and anger), to be comfortable (so disruption breeds resentment), to be respected (so any slight wounds deeply). Most conflicts grow from one of these soils.

Help them see that these desires are often good things turned into ultimate things. Wanting respect or security is not evil; demanding them, building our peace on them, and warring to get them is the disorder James names. The issue is the rule the desire has taken.

Move toward surrender. The remedy is not to pretend we have no desires but to bring the ruling desire to God, to loosen its grip by finding our security and significance in Him. Ask each student to name the root desire in their conflict and consider what it would mean to surrender it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Good desires turned into ultimate, ruling desires (disordered love).
- Tracing conflict to its root craving as a path to repentance.
- Security and significance found in God rather than in winning.
- Surrender of ruling desires as the way to peace.

Discussion Prompts

- What desire was really driving your recent conflict?
- Is that desire a good thing you have made into an ultimate thing?
- What would it mean to surrender that desire to God?

Question 3

Student Question:

James says, "You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (vv. 2–3). What does this teach about prayer, both the failure to pray and the problem of self-centered prayer?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

James turns to prayer with two sharp observations. First, "you do not have, because you do not ask." Much of our striving and conflict springs from simple prayerlessness; we scheme and fight for what we will not bring to God. Second, "you ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." Even when we pray, our prayers can be self-serving.

Teach the first failure gently but directly. Prayerlessness is often a form of practical unbelief or self-reliance; we try to secure life on our own rather than asking the Father who gives generously (echoing 1:5). James calls his readers back to the simple, humble act of asking.

Teach the second failure carefully. James is not condemning all prayer for our needs; Jesus taught us to ask for daily bread. The problem is prayer aimed entirely at our own pleasures, treating God as a means to our self-indulgence rather than seeking His will and glory. The motive, not merely the content, matters.

Apply it to the students' prayer lives. Invite them to examine both the absence of prayer and the self-centeredness of prayer. Healthy prayer brings real desires to God while submitting them to His will, as Jesus did in Gethsemane: not my will, but yours be done. This reorders the heart and often the desire itself.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Prayerlessness as practical unbelief and self-reliance.
- The invitation to ask God, who gives generously (James 1:5; Matthew 7:7).
- Self-centered prayer that seeks to fund our own pleasures.
- Prayer that submits desires to God's will (Matthew 26:39).
- The motive of prayer mattering, not merely its content.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you simply fail to ask God at all?
- Where do your prayers mainly serve your own comfort?
- How might submitting your desires to God's will change your praying?

Question 4

Student Question:

Examine your own prayers. Where do you simply fail to ask God at all, and where do you ask mainly for what would serve your own comfort or pleasure? How might God be inviting you to pray differently?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the teaching on prayer to the student's own life. Ask them to examine both directions: the areas where they do not pray at all, and the prayers that are mostly about their own pleasure.

Help them notice the pattern of prayerlessness. Often we pray least about the things we are most determined to handle ourselves, our money, our plans, our conflicts, the very areas where our cravings rule. The absence of prayer maps onto the presence of self-reliance.

Help them notice the self-centeredness too, without false guilt. It is right to bring our needs to God; the question is whether our prayer life is oriented toward His kingdom and will or merely toward our own comfort and advancement. Even good requests can be offered with a self-serving heart.

Encourage a concrete shift this week, such as beginning to pray about an area they have been handling alone, or reframing a habitual self-focused prayer to seek God's will and glory. The aim is prayer that draws near to God rather than using Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Prayerlessness mapping onto areas of self-reliance.
- The legitimacy of bringing real needs to God.
- Reorienting prayer toward God's kingdom and will (Matthew 6:9–10, 33).
- Prayer as drawing near to God rather than using Him.

Discussion Prompts

- In what area do you handle things yourself rather than pray?
- Where are your prayers mostly about your own comfort?
- How will you pray differently this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

James warns, “You adulterous people! 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” (v. 4). Why does James use the language of adultery, and what does it mean that friendship with the world is enmity with God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 4 is the most jarring in the passage: “You adulterous people!” James addresses believers as a betrayed spouse would address an unfaithful partner. This is the heaviest doctrinal moment of the lesson, so let it land with full weight. Our relationship with God is covenantal, like a marriage, and divided loyalty is spiritual adultery.

Explain the biblical background. Throughout Scripture, God describes His covenant people's idolatry as adultery, because He has bound Himself to them in faithful love and they have given their hearts elsewhere. James stands in that prophetic tradition. To love the world's values while professing to love God is to betray the covenant.

Define friendship with the world carefully. James is not condemning the physical creation or every cultural good, nor calling for withdrawal from people. He means embracing the world's value system, its pride, greed, self-indulgence, and hostility to God, as the governing love of our

lives. Such friendship is enmity with God because the two value systems are fundamentally opposed.

State the stark conclusion plainly: “whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” This echoes Jesus's teaching that no one can serve two masters. There is no neutral middle where we can be devoted to both. The very wish to befriend the world's values sets us against God. This should sober every comfortable, compromised believer and call them back to undivided devotion.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Our relationship with God as covenantal, so divided loyalty is spiritual adultery.
- The biblical tradition of idolatry described as adultery (Hosea; Ezekiel 16).
- Friendship with the world as embracing its God-opposing value system, not creation or culture as such.
- The impossibility of serving two masters (Matthew 6:24; 1 John 2:15–17).
- No neutral middle ground between devotion to God and to the world.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does James use the language of adultery for worldliness?
- What does friendship with the world actually mean, and not mean?
- Why is there no neutral middle between God and the world?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where have you been trying to be a friend of both God and the world, holding God's hand while keeping your heart's loyalty with the world's values? What would undivided loyalty to God require of you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the issue of divided loyalty into the student's life. Most believers are not openly rejecting God; they are quietly trying to keep a hand in both worlds, professing devotion to God while their hearts are set on the world's prizes.

Help students identify where this happens for them. It may be in their pursuit of money or status, their entertainment and appetites, their compromises to fit in, or the values by which they actually make decisions. The test is not their stated beliefs but where their heart's loyalty truly lies.

Be careful and pastoral. The goal is not to manufacture guilt over every enjoyment of the world but to expose genuine divided loyalty, places where the world's values, not God's, are steering the heart. The prophets and Jesus both call for the heart's supreme allegiance to God.

Move toward undivided devotion. Ask what it would require for God to have their whole heart in the area they identified, a changed pursuit, a surrendered ambition, a different standard for decisions. Undivided loyalty is not achieved by effort alone but by returning to God, which the next verses describe.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The subtle attempt to befriend both God and the world.
- The heart's true loyalty revealed by its pursuits, not its professions.
- The call to supreme allegiance to God (Matthew 22:37).
- Undivided devotion as the fruit of returning to God.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you trying to befriend both God and the world?
- What does your heart's loyalty reveal about its true devotion?
- What would giving God your whole heart in that area require?

Question 7

Student Question:

James says God “yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us,” but “he gives more grace,” for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (vv. 5–6). What does this teach about God's jealous love, the abundance of His grace, and why pride and humility are so decisive in our relationship with Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 5 and 6 turn from rebuke to grace, and the turn is breathtaking. God “yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us.” His jealousy is not petty insecurity but the holy, passionate love of a faithful husband who will not share his beloved's heart. He wants us wholly because He loves us wholly.

Then comes the glorious word: “But he gives more grace.” Against the backdrop of our spiritual adultery, God does not merely tolerate us; He gives more grace, grace upon grace, grace greater than our unfaithfulness. This is the heart of the gospel, that where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.

But the grace has a condition of posture: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” James quotes Proverbs to make the decisive point. Pride is the great barrier to grace, because the proud will not admit need, repent, or receive. Humility is the open hand that grace fills. The same grace that the proud cannot access pours freely on the humble.

Teach why pride and humility are so decisive. Grace, by its nature, is received, not earned or controlled. The proud heart insists on self-sufficiency and so closes itself to a gift it will not admit

it needs. The humble heart confesses need and receives. This is why James will immediately call for humbling ourselves. The path to more grace runs through humility, not achievement.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's holy, covenantal jealousy as the passion of faithful love.
- The abundance of grace: He gives more grace, greater than our sin (Romans 5:20).
- God opposing the proud and giving grace to the humble (Proverbs 3:34; 1 Peter 5:5).
- Pride as the barrier to grace; humility as the open hand that receives it.
- Grace as received, not earned or controlled.

Discussion Prompts

- What does God's jealous yearning reveal about His love for us?
- Why does pride block grace while humility receives it?
- What does it mean to you that God gives more grace than our sin?

Question 8

Student Question:

Where is pride keeping you from receiving the grace God is ready to give, perhaps in an area where you have refused to admit need, ask for help, or repent? What would humbling yourself there look like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the truth that God gives grace to the humble. Pride blocks grace in concrete ways: refusing to admit need, refusing to ask for help, refusing to repent. Invite students to locate where pride is closing their hand to grace.

Help them see the everyday faces of pride. It is the marriage where neither will say sorry first, the struggle no one will admit, the sin defended rather than confessed, the help never asked for because asking feels like weakness. In each, pride keeps grace at arm's length.

Connect humbling oneself to receiving grace. The student who finally admits the need, asks for help, or confesses the sin opens the very door through which grace flows. Humility is not self-hatred; it is honesty before God that makes room for His gift.

Encourage one concrete act of humbling this week, an admission, a request for help, a confession, an act of repentance in the area they named. Assure them that on the other side of humbling is not condemnation but more grace, for God delights to lift up the humble.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pride's concrete forms: refusing to admit need, ask help, or repent.

- Humbling oneself as opening the door to grace.
- Humility as honesty before God, not self-hatred.
- The promise of more grace on the other side of humbling.

Discussion Prompts

- Where is pride keeping you from grace right now?
- What would humbling yourself in that area look like?
- What grace might God be ready to give if you opened your hand?

Question 9

Student Question:

James gives a series of commands: "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (vv. 7–10). What do these commands teach about the way back to God, the reality of spiritual conflict, and the promise attached to genuine repentance and humility?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 7 through 10 give a rapid series of commands that together map the path of return to God. They are not random exhortations but a coherent journey of repentance, so walk students through them in order.

It begins with submission: "Submit yourselves therefore to God." The proud heart that has befriended the world must yield to God's rightful rule. Then, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." This acknowledges the reality of spiritual conflict; behind our worldliness lies an enemy, but he is no match for the believer who submits to God and resists him. Note the order: submission to God comes before resistance of the devil, for we resist in God's strength, not our own.

The journey continues: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." This is a precious promise; the God we have betrayed welcomes the returning heart. Then the language of cleansing and mourning: "Cleanse your hands... purify your hearts, you double-minded," and "Be wretched and mourn and weep." Genuine repentance involves both outward and inward change and a real grief over sin, not a casual acknowledgment. James calls the worldly to take their sin seriously.

The series climaxes in promise: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." The whole path runs through humility to exaltation. The God who opposes the proud lifts up the humble. Teach this as the consistent pattern of the gospel and as ongoing in the believer's life: repentance is not merely how we begin with God but how we keep returning to Him and

walking with Him. Let students see both the seriousness of the call and the warmth of the promise. The way home is humble repentance, and the welcome is sure.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The coherent path of repentance: submit, resist, draw near, cleanse, mourn, humble.
- Submission to God preceding resistance of the devil; we resist in His strength.
- The reality of spiritual conflict and the devil's flight before the submitted believer (Ephesians 6:10–13).
- God's promise to draw near to those who draw near to Him.
- Genuine repentance involving real grief over sin, not casual acknowledgment.
- Repentance as ongoing in the believer's walk, with humility leading to God's exaltation.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does submission to God come before resisting the devil?
- What does it mean that genuine repentance includes mourning over sin?
- How does the promise that God will draw near encourage your return?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage. James exposes our divided hearts and then calls us home to a God who gives more grace to the humble. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to submit, draw near, and humble yourself before Him this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone asks for one concrete way to submit, draw near, and humble oneself before God this week. The passage has exposed divided hearts and laid out the path home; now it asks the student to take a step on that path.

Help students integrate the threads: tracing conflict to craving, examining prayer, confronting friendship with the world, opening to grace through humility, and walking the path of repentance. Where is Jesus calling them to come home?

Encourage a single, ownable commitment anchored in the commands of verses 7 through 10, such as submitting a specific area to God, drawing near through renewed prayer, or humbling themselves in a relationship or before God in repentance.

Close with the passage's overwhelming hope. The God who is jealous for us gives more grace and promises to lift up the humble and draw near to those who draw near to Him. Students do not crawl back to a reluctant God; they come home to a Father whose arms are already open. Let them leave humbled and encouraged, assured of grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The path of return walked in concrete, specific repentance.
- More grace promised to the humble who draw near.
- Repentance as homecoming to a welcoming God.
- Sanctification through ongoing humbling and drawing near.

Discussion Prompts

- In one sentence, how is Jesus calling you to humble yourself and draw near this week?
- Which command of verses 7 through 10 most presses on you?
- How does the promise of more grace shape the way you return to God?