

Decision Making and the Will of God, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: What Are My Motives? Examining the Heart

James 4:1–10

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson moves from the question of Scripture to the question of the heart. Having asked whether a course of action is biblical, the wise believer next asks why he wants to do it. Doctrinally, what is at stake here is the biblical teaching on the human heart and its motives. James 4:1–10 traces our quarrels and cravings to the passions at war within, exposes how even prayer can be corrupted by selfish desire, names friendship with the world as spiritual adultery, and declares that God opposes the proud while giving grace to the humble. The teacher should help students see that God weighs motives, not merely actions, and that a permissible deed can be driven by an impermissible heart.

Two doctrinal guardrails matter in this lesson. First, while Scripture is unsparing about the sinfulness and self-deception of the human heart (Jeremiah 17:9), we must not slide into a Calvinistic notion of total inability that denies a person's genuine capacity to respond to God. James 4 itself is one long string of commands to act: submit, resist, draw near, cleanse, purify, humble yourselves. The very structure of the passage assumes that those addressed are truly able to repent and turn. Second, the answer to corrupt motives is not endless, paralyzing introspection but honest repentance met by abundant grace. Keep both the searching diagnosis and the hopeful remedy in view, so students leave humbled but not crushed.

Beyond the doctrine, this lesson is profoundly formational, because it goes after the place from which all our decisions actually flow. The deeper aim is to raise up believers who are willing to be honest with God about the cravings, fears, pride, and hunger for approval that so often drive their choices, and who have learned that the One who exposes the heart is the One who washes it clean. The teacher should handle the room tenderly, leading people not into morbid self-suspicion but into the light, where confession meets the promise that God gives more grace. Send students home both more honest about their motives and more confident in the grace that cleanses them.

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?" (v. 1). According to James, where do our conflicts and cravings really come from? Why does he trace them to the heart rather than to our circumstances or the people around us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by letting James reframe the question. The church he writes to is full of quarrels and fights, and the natural assumption is that the problem is the other people, the circumstances, the disagreements themselves. James cuts beneath all of that. The real source, he says, is internal: “your passions are at war within you.” The word for passions points to our cravings, our pleasures, the desires that demand satisfaction. The battles among us are the outward smoke of a fire burning inside.

Help students see how counterintuitive and humbling this is. We almost always locate the cause of our conflicts and frustrations outside ourselves. If only that person were different, if only the situation would change, then I would be at peace. James insists that the deepest problem travels with us, because it lives in us. A craving that does not get what it wants turns into frustration, and frustration turns into conflict. The decision maker who does not understand this will keep blaming circumstances for what is really a matter of the heart.

Draw the line to decision making, which is the point of the study. If our cravings can drive us into quarrels, they can just as easily drive our choices. A man can convince himself that he is making a reasoned, even spiritual, decision, when in fact a hidden passion, for money, for pleasure, for status, for revenge, is steering the whole thing. This is why “What are my motives?” must be asked. The same internal desires that fuel conflict also fuel choices, often without our noticing.

Set this against the broader biblical witness about the heart. Jesus taught that out of the heart come the things that defile a person (Mark 7:21–23), and Jeremiah warned that the heart is deceitful above all things (Jeremiah 17:9). Be careful, however, not to present the heart as simply incapable of any good response; the same James will immediately call these people to act. The point is not that we cannot turn, but that we must look honestly inward, because that is where our decisions are really being shaped.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Conflicts and cravings traced to the passions within, not merely to circumstances or other people
- The human tendency to locate the cause of our troubles outside ourselves
- Hidden desires steering our decisions, not only our quarrels
- The biblical teaching that defilement comes from the heart (Mark 7:21–23; Jeremiah 17:9)
- Honest self-examination as essential because decisions are shaped from within

Discussion Prompts

- When you are in conflict, where do you instinctively place the blame?
- How can a hidden craving steer a decision while we tell ourselves it is purely reasonable?
- Why is it humbling, and freeing, to admit the problem is often inside us?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think of a recent decision or conflict in your life. If you trace it honestly back to its root, what desire was really driving you? Be specific about the craving underneath the surface.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question asks students to do exactly what James just described: trace a conflict or choice back to the desire underneath it. The goal is concreteness. General admissions that we are all sinners cost us nothing; naming the specific craving that drove a specific decision is where real self-knowledge begins. The teacher should model honesty and patience, since this kind of tracing takes a moment of quiet reflection.

Help students learn the skill of tracing. Behind a flash of anger may sit a craving for control or respect that was threatened. Behind a defensive argument may sit a hunger to be right. Behind an impulsive purchase may sit a desire for comfort or status. The surface event is rarely the real issue; the desire underneath it is. Learning to ask, what did I want so badly that I reacted this way, uncovers the motive at work.

Then point gently toward grace. The purpose of this exercise is not to wallow in guilt but to bring the real motive into the open where God can deal with it. Once a craving is named, it loses much of its hidden power, and it can be confessed, surrendered, and replaced. Encourage students that the most honest people in the room are usually the ones growing fastest, because they are giving God something real to redeem.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Tracing a specific decision or conflict back to its driving desire
- The difference between vague admissions of sin and naming a specific craving
- Common hidden desires: control, respect, comfort, status, being right
- Naming a motive as the first step toward confessing and surrendering it

Discussion Prompts

- What did you want so badly in that moment that it shaped your reaction or choice?
- Why is it harder to name a specific craving than to admit sin in general?
- How does bringing a hidden motive into the open begin to loosen its grip?

Question 3**Student Question:**

James says, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (v. 3). What does it tell us that even our prayers can be corrupted by wrong motives? How can we be praying about a decision and still be in the wrong?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This verse is sobering and worth slowing down over, because it shows how deep the problem of motive runs. James has just told his readers that they do not have because they do not ask. Now he adds that even when they do ask, they ask wrongly, to spend what they receive on their own pleasures. Prayer itself, the most spiritual of activities, can be hijacked by a self-serving heart. We can pray hard about a decision and still be entirely in the wrong, because we are simply asking God to bless what our cravings have already chosen.

Help students feel the implications for decision making. Many of us assume that if we have prayed about a choice, our motives must be pure. James will not let us rest there. A person can spend weeks in prayer over a decision and the whole time be asking God to ratify a desire that is selfish at its core. Prayer is not a laundering machine that automatically cleanses a corrupt motive; it is meant to be the place where we submit our motives to God, not the place where we baptize them unexamined.

Clarify what right and wrong asking look like. Wrong asking treats God as a means to our ends, a resource for funding our passions. Right asking submits our desires to His will, as Jesus did in Gethsemane, “not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). The mark of right asking is a genuine willingness to hear no, to have the desire itself corrected, and to want God’s glory more than our own gratification.

Move toward the constructive use of prayer in decisions. Rather than praying only that God would grant what we want, we can pray that He would purify what we want, exposing any selfish motive and aligning our desires with His. A decision soaked in that kind of prayer is far safer than one merely stamped with a few religious words. The aim is not to stop praying about decisions, but to pray in a way that lets God examine the asker.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Even prayer can be corrupted by self-serving motives (James 4:3)
- Praying about a decision does not by itself purify the motive behind it
- Wrong asking treats God as a means to our ends; right asking submits to His will (Luke 22:42)
- Prayer as the place to surrender and purify our desires, not to baptize them unexamined
- A willingness to hear no as a mark of right asking

Discussion Prompts

- Have you ever assumed your motives were pure simply because you had prayed about a choice?
- What is the difference between asking God to bless your desire and asking Him to purify it?
- How can prayer become the place where God examines us, not just where we make requests?

Question 4

Student Question:

Examine one thing you have been wanting badly, even something you have prayed for. Is any part of that desire really a wish to “spend it on your passions”? How would you know the difference between a sanctified desire and a selfish one?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question gives students a tool they will use for the rest of their lives: holding a strong desire up to the light and asking what is really in it. The goal is not to make people suspicious of every longing, since God Himself gives good desires, but to teach the discernment that distinguishes a sanctified desire from a selfish one. Most strong wants are a mixture, and honesty about the mixture is the point.

Offer students some practical tests of a desire. Does this want submit to God’s revealed will, or does it strain against it? Would I still want it if no one ever knew I had it, or is much of its appeal the admiration it would bring? Am I willing for God to say no, or has this desire hardened into a demand? Does getting it serve others and honor God, or chiefly gratify me? These questions do not condemn desire as such; they expose what is driving it.

Then point toward what to do with what is found. Where a desire proves selfish, it can be confessed and surrendered. Where it is mixed, the selfish strands can be named and the good ones kept. And where a desire is genuinely good and submitted to God, it can be held with open hands and even pursued with joy. We will return to this theme in a later lesson on sanctified desire; here the aim is simply to learn to examine a longing honestly before acting on it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Holding a strong desire up to the light rather than acting on it unexamined
- Practical tests: submission to God’s will, freedom from craving applause, willingness to hear no, service versus self
- Most desires as a mixture of sanctified and selfish strands
- Confessing the selfish, keeping the good, holding desires with open hands

Discussion Prompts

- What is one thing you have wanted badly lately, and what is really driving the want?
- Which of the tests of a desire is most revealing for you right now?
- How do you tell the difference between a good desire and a selfish one?

Question 5

Student Question:

James warns, "Friendship with the world is enmity with God" (v. 4). What does it mean to be a friend of the world, and why does James use such strong language, even calling it spiritual adultery? How does worldliness quietly shape the decisions we make?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by defining the world as James means it. He is not condemning the physical creation, which God made good, nor ordinary involvement in society. The world here is the whole system of values, desires, and priorities that leaves God out and lives for self, status, pleasure, and possessions. To be a friend of the world is to adopt that value system as one's own, to want what the world wants and measure life the way the world measures it.

Explain the startling language. James calls his readers "adulterous people," because the relationship between God and His people is covenantal, like a marriage. To give our hearts' allegiance to the world's values is to be unfaithful to the God who has bound Himself to us. That is why friendship with the world is not a minor flaw but enmity with God; the two loyalties cannot share the throne of the heart. This is strong medicine, and James means it to wake us up.

Bring this directly into decision making, which is where worldliness usually hides. Few of us would consciously decide to defy God. But the world's assumptions seep into our choices almost invisibly: we measure a job mainly by salary and prestige, a home mainly by status, a use of time mainly by personal pleasure, a relationship mainly by what we get from it. Each of these can be a small act of friendship with the world, a decision made by its scale of values rather than God's.

Help students test their decisions against this. When you weigh a choice, whose scoreboard are you using? The world asks what will make me richer, more comfortable, more admired. The believer learns to ask what will honor God, serve others, and form me into the likeness of Christ. Worldliness is not mainly about a list of forbidden activities; it is about whose values quietly govern the heart, and therefore the choices, of the one deciding.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The world as a value system that leaves God out, not the physical creation or ordinary life
- Friendship with the world as covenant unfaithfulness, hence enmity with God (James 4:4)
- Worldliness as adopting the world's scale of values rather than God's
- Decisions quietly governed by salary, status, comfort, and pleasure
- Testing a choice by whose scoreboard we are using

Discussion Prompts

- What does worldliness actually look like in the way we make everyday choices?
- Whose scoreboard do you most often use when weighing a big decision?
- Where have the world's values slipped into a choice you thought was neutral?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where does the desire for the world's approval, comfort, or values most influence your choices? Name one area where you are tempted to decide based on what impresses people rather than what pleases God.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question turns the warning about worldliness into specifics. The fear of man and the love of approval are among the most powerful hidden motives in decision making, and they are deeply respectable, which makes them easy to miss. The teacher should help students move from the general admission that we all care too much what others think to the particular area where it actually steers their choices.

Help students locate the pressure point. For one person it is career, where decisions are quietly driven by the desire to impress peers or climb in others' eyes. For another it is spending, where purchases are aimed at projecting an image. For another it is even ministry or service, where the applause of people slips in as the real reward. Naming the specific arena where approval rules is the first step toward deciding by a different standard.

Then point to the cure, which is not indifference to people but the fear of the Lord. Proverbs says the fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe (Proverbs 29:25). The believer who increasingly lives before an audience of One is set free from the exhausting need to manage everyone's opinion. Encourage one concrete step: a decision this week made deliberately for God's approval rather than the crowd's.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The fear of man and love of approval as powerful, respectable, hidden motives
- Approval-driven decisions in career, spending, and even service
- The fear of the Lord as the cure for the fear of man (Proverbs 29:25)
- Living before an audience of One

Discussion Prompts

- In what area do you most decide by what impresses people?
- How does the fear of man show up in your choices, in respectable disguise?
- What would one decision made for God's approval rather than the crowd's look like this week?

Question 7**Student Question:**

James says God “opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (v. 6). How does pride distort our decision making, and what does it look like to make a decision as a humble person who is receiving grace rather than a proud person resisting it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Center students on the hinge of the passage: “He gives more grace... God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” In the middle of an unsparing diagnosis, James announces the most hopeful word imaginable. There is more grace, always more, for those who will humble themselves to receive it. But the same verse carries a warning: God actively opposes the proud. Pride is not merely unattractive; it positions a person against the grace of God.

Show how pride distorts decisions specifically. The proud decision maker trusts his own judgment too much and seeks counsel too little. He resists correction, because admitting he might be wrong threatens his sense of competence. He decides quickly and defends his choices stubbornly. He is reluctant to pray, because prayer is an admission of need. In all of this, pride cuts him off from the very grace, the wisdom, the counsel, the correction, that he most needs to decide well.

Then paint the contrast. The humble decision maker holds his own judgment loosely, welcomes counsel, remains correctable, and prays readily because he knows he needs help. He is not paralyzed by insecurity; he simply decides as a person who is receiving grace rather than resisting it. This is not weakness. It is the posture in which God draws near and pours out wisdom, the posture of a child who trusts his Father enough to ask.

Tie pride and humility back to the heart’s motives, the theme of the lesson. Often the proudest thing in a decision is the unexamined assumption that our motives are fine. Humility is willing to be searched. The humble believer says, with the psalmist, “Search me, O God, and know my heart” (Psalm 139:23), and that very willingness opens him to the grace that the proud forfeit.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- More grace for the humble, active opposition for the proud (James 4:6)
- Pride distorting decisions: overtrusting self, resisting counsel and correction, prayerlessness
- Humility as the correctable, prayerful posture that receives grace and wisdom
- Humility as willingness to be searched (Psalm 139:23)
- Pride cutting us off from the very grace we need to decide well

Discussion Prompts

- How does pride show up in the way you make and defend decisions?
- What is the difference between deciding as one resisting grace and deciding as one receiving it?
- Why does humility, not self-confidence, actually lead to better decisions?

Question 8

Student Question:

Where has pride shaped a recent decision, a need to be right, to be admired, to be in control? What would it look like to humble yourself before God in that very area this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question asks students to find pride at work in a specific recent choice. Pride is notoriously hard to see in ourselves, precisely because it convinces us we do not have it. Help students look for its fingerprints rather than its face: a refusal to seek counsel, a quickness to defend, a discomfort with being corrected, a decision driven by the need to win or to look competent.

Encourage honest, specific naming. Was there a recent decision where the real driver was the need to be right in an argument, to be admired by a certain person, or to keep control of something I should have entrusted to God or shared with others? The very fact that this is uncomfortable to name is often a sign that pride is involved. Honesty here is itself an act of the humility James commends.

Then move toward the concrete humbling James calls for. To humble oneself is not to grovel but to take a real, lowering step: to seek the counsel we avoided, to admit we were wrong, to ask forgiveness, to relinquish control, to bring the matter openly to God. Invite each student to choose one such step this week, trusting the promise that God gives grace to exactly this kind of humility.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difficulty of seeing pride in ourselves
- Recognizing pride by its fingerprints: refusing counsel, defending, resisting correction, needing control
- Honest naming as itself an act of humility
- Concrete steps of humbling: seeking counsel, admitting wrong, relinquishing control, coming to God

Discussion Prompts

- Where can you spot pride's fingerprints in a recent decision?
- Which is hardest for you to admit: needing to be right, admired, or in control?
- What concrete step of humbling could you take in that area this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

James calls his readers to a thorough response: "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil... Draw near to God... Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (vv. 7-8). What does genuine repentance over our motives look like here, and what does this passage teach about our real ability and responsibility to respond to God rather than wait passively?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it brings the whole passage to its point, so teach it carefully. After diagnosing the divided, craving heart, James does not tell his readers to wait helplessly for God to do something to them. He issues a rapid series of commands: submit, resist, draw near, cleanse, purify, be wretched, mourn, weep, humble yourselves. This is the anatomy of genuine repentance, and its grammar is crucial. Every verb is an imperative addressed to people who are assumed to be able to obey it.

Walk through the movement of repentance James lays out. It begins with submission to God, surrendering our will and our motives to His authority. It includes resisting the devil, actively refusing the temptations that feed our cravings, with the promise that he will flee. It centers on drawing near to God, with the assurance that He will draw near to us. And it involves cleansing and purifying, a decisive turning from sin in both action (hands) and motive (hearts), with honest grief over what we find. This is not a vague spiritual mood; it is a definite, willed turning.

Now draw the doctrinal point clearly, because it touches a boundary that matters in our teaching. The structure of this passage stands against any view that human beings are so totally unable that they can make no real response to God until He first irresistibly changes them. James commands sinners to cleanse their hands and the double-minded to purify their hearts, and he promises that those who draw near will find God drawing near. The gospel call is genuine and the human response is genuine. By God's grace and through His word, people are truly able to repent, submit, and turn, and they are responsible to do so. Grace does not bypass the will; it summons it.

Hold this together with the lesson's emphasis on grace, so students do not hear a message of self-salvation. We do not cleanse ourselves in our own strength or earn God's favor by our turning; it is the God who gives more grace who draws near to the humble. But that grace meets us as we respond, not instead of our responding. The promise "draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" perfectly captures the balance: a real human movement toward God, answered by a real divine movement toward us.

Bring it home to motives and decisions. Genuine repentance over our motives is not a feeling of regret that changes nothing. It is a definite turning: confessing the craving, the worldliness, the pride; resisting it; and drawing near to God for cleansing and for grace to decide differently. The double-minded person, trying to be a friend of God and the world at once, is called to become single-hearted. That undivided heart is the soil in which God-honoring decisions finally grow.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The anatomy of genuine repentance: submit, resist, draw near, cleanse, purify, humble (James 4:7–10)
- Repentance as a definite, willed turning, not a vague mood or mere regret
- The string of imperatives assuming a real human ability to respond to God
- A scriptural answer to total inability: the gospel call and the human response are both genuine
- Grace summoning the will rather than bypassing it; we turn, yet not by our own strength
- The double-minded made single-hearted as the soil of godly decisions

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between feeling regret over a motive and genuinely repenting of it?
- What does it tell us that James commands sinners to cleanse their hands and purify their hearts?
- How does 'draw near to God, and he will draw near to you' hold together human response and divine grace?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across James 4:1–10. James exposes the divided heart and then offers more grace to all who humble themselves. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this passage. What is the single truth here that you most need to carry into your next decision?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the lesson and asks each student to name one concrete way Christ is forming them through it. Resist generalities. "I want purer motives" is a good beginning, but press toward the specific: purer motives about what decision, expressed how, starting when. The searching truth of James 4 is meant to do its work in a real choice this week.

Walk back through the movement of the passage as a prompt. James traced our conflicts to inner cravings, exposed self-serving prayer, named friendship with the world, warned against pride, and then called for humble, whole-hearted repentance met by more grace. Invite each student to ask which of these truths their heart most needs to grasp, and where a divided heart is currently shaping a decision they face.

Close by recentering on grace and transformation. The aim of this lesson is not to leave students anxiously inspecting their motives, but to send them, humbled and honest, to the God who gives more grace and washes the heart clean. Encourage each one to carry a single truth into the week, returning to it in prayer, so the word forms in them the undivided heart from which good decisions flow.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Scripture aimed at forming an undivided heart, not at anxious self-inspection
- Honest examination of motives met by the promise of more grace
- Humility and repentance as the soil of God-honoring decisions
- Carrying one concrete truth into a specific choice this week

Discussion Prompts

- Which truth from this passage does your heart most need before your next decision?
- Where is a divided heart currently shaping a choice you face?
- How can this group pray for and encourage you in that one specific step?