

Decision Making and the Will of God

Lesson 3: What Are My Motives? Examining the Heart -- James 4:1-10

Two men give the same large gift to the same good cause on the same Sunday. From the outside the act is identical, the amount is identical, the cause is identical. But God, who sees what no one else can see, knows that one gift rises from a heart full of gratitude and love, while the other is given to be noticed, to buy a reputation, to quiet a guilty conscience. The deed looks the same. The motive makes them worlds apart. Scripture insists, again and again, that God weighs not only what we do but why we do it.

That is why, once we have asked whether a thing is biblical, the very next question a wise believer asks is harder and more searching: What are my motives? Many of the decisions we face are not choices between an obvious right and an obvious wrong. They are choices that could be made for love or for selfishness, for the glory of God or for the applause of people, out of faith or out of fear. The action may be perfectly permissible. The question is what is driving it. And here we meet a problem, because the human heart is a master of disguise, endlessly skilled at dressing up selfish desire in respectable clothes.

James knew this terrain well. He looks at a church torn by quarrels and fights and asks, in effect, where do these really come from? Not from the surface issues people argue about, he says, but from the passions at war within. "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?" Underneath our conflicts and our cravings, James finds a heart grasping for what it wants. He even reaches into our prayers and exposes how a request can be corrupted by motive: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." This is uncomfortable reading, and it is meant to be.

But James does not leave us exposed and hopeless. He turns, in the same breath, to the most hopeful word a sinner can hear: "But he gives more grace." God opposes the proud, yes, but He gives grace to the humble. So this lesson is not an invitation to morbid self-suspicion or paralyzing introspection. It is an invitation to come into the light, to let God search our motives, and to find that the One who exposes our hearts is the same One who washes them clean. "Draw near to God," James says, "and he will draw near to you." That is an offer no anxious, divided heart should refuse.

Group Discussion: Why do you think it is so much easier to examine what we are doing than to examine why we are doing it? As a group, talk about how a good action can be driven by a wrong motive, and a hard or costly action can be driven by a right one. What helps us get honest about the real reasons behind our decisions?

Personal Reflection: Think of a decision you are weighing right now. Underneath the reasons you would give out loud, what is really driving you? Be honest before God about any craving,

fear, pride, or hunger for approval mixed into it. What would it look like to bring that motive into the light and ask God to cleanse it this week?

Read James 4:1–10

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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.
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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.
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Jeremiah 17:9–10, the heart is deceitful above all things, yet the Lord searches it; 1 Samuel 16:7, the Lord looks not on the outward appearance but on the heart; Proverbs 16:2, all a man's ways are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit; Psalm 139:23–24, the prayer that God would search us and know our hearts; 1 Corinthians 10:31, doing all things, even eating and drinking, to the glory of God

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