

## **James 4: You Have Less Time Than You Think**

### **Introduction:**

Why do we plan for the future? We want to be prepared for what is coming and we want to be prepared for any surprises or unknown variables that may crop up. We want to be able, to the best of our abilities, to direct life's trajectory towards the most desired outcome. On a smaller scale, we want to make sure that we are doing the things we want, making the best use of our time, and that we are secure and comfortable. We all plan for the future in some way, shape, or form.

Let's do a quick poll. Raise your hand if:

- You have plans for lunch after church
- You have at least one appointment this coming week
- Have homework that you need to do
- You keep an updated calendar, either daily, weekly, or monthly, to keep track of everything going on
- You know whose house you are going to for Christmas
- You have your vacation planned already for next summer
- You have a car payment or a mortgage
- You have a 401k, IRA, or other retirement plan

We all have plans, make plans, and rely on plans. Today we are going to be looking at James 4, which several have already told me this week is densely packed and maybe even a little overwhelming. The crux of this passage comes in v. 14 where James says "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." Any planning that we may do assumes that there is a fixed amount of time that we are working with, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year, and that ultimately time will go on as scheduled without

interruption. But James here contradicts that assumption, saying instead that we aren't guaranteed the next minute, the next hour, day, week, month, or even year. We are finite, and our time is in God's hands. Mortality, the fact that everything that every lives on earth will someday die, is one of the first things that we learn as children that moves us towards adulthood.

And so James' assessment that we are all only working with a finite amount of time sets the stage for this chapter, in which he is challenging the church to really evaluate her relationship with God and with the world, asserting that we can really only serve God and anything less than that puts us at odds with God, that there are steps we can take to renew our relationship with God and reject the sinful parts of the world around us, but that we need to get on it right now, there is no time to lose!

We are going to break down James 4 into more manageable sections this morning by responding to four questions: What do you really want, who do you really love, how much time do you really have, and what should you really do?

### **A) What do you really want?**

#### **4:1-4 (Pastor Alex Paraphrase)**

**We are endlessly chasing after what the world tells us we should want but do not have. We war against our family and friends and neighbors for what they have and we want. We kill others through our words, thoughts, feelings, and actions for our own selfish gain. And we don't get what we want when we pray to God because we aren't actually praying for what we need; we are greedily asking for things to gratify our selfish nature.**

In the first three verses of chapter four, James states that we are warring against each other because we don't aren't getting what we want. And we don't get what we want either because we don't ask God, or we ask 'wrongly.' The word 'cravings' comes from the Greek word 'hedone' from which we get the term hedonism. Mark and Jeneatte Littleton write in their book "What's in the Bible for Teens" "This term implies the very physical feelings associated with the bodily appetites. *The sense is not of the inherent evil of desire but rather the conflict of desires that cannot all be satisfied simultaneously or without one cancelling out the other.*" I'm really drawn to this idea of conflicting desires. What does it mean to want two things that are naturally set against each other? Have you ever been hungry and tired at the same time? If you have then you know that you will only eat if the food is already made or easily accessible. And it's usually during these moments that you end up eating the worst stuff, because you're trying to eat quickly so that you can just go to bed. It can be a real challenge to figure out how to meet those needs at the same time, with both battling for attention but inevitably with one cancelling out the other.

The warring of desires that James is talking about here is the war between those things we want that come from God, what I'm going to call our deepest Godly desires, and those things that we want that come from a place of selfishness. So what do you really want? Let's consider our cravings in these two categories.

***What are our deepest Godly desires?*** Do we want to make the world a better place, leave a mark, be better disciples, be a good spouse, good parent, good friend? **In your heart of hearts, what do you really want?**

***What are our selfish desires?*** Our selfish desires are those things that have nothing to do with God or even with who we are as people, although sometimes we can convince ourselves that they do. They are all about stroking the need to consume or the need to boost our ego. Selfish desires are the wants for **newer, bigger, better, or another**. We may want a new car, a bigger house, a better TV, or another vacation, and while none of these things are inherently bad, they have nothing to do with God or who we are as people. The problem becomes when we let these selfish desires take over our lives, and so instead of pursuing discipleship, or making the world a better place, or becoming a better spouse/parent/friend all in the name of Jesus, we spend our time, energy, and effort chasing after and dreaming of those selfish desires.

And in this war between our deepest Godly desires and our selfish desires, we do not get what we want because we either don't ask God, which should be an automatic red flag that this is probably a selfish desire and not a Godly desire, or we ask wrongly. James here is referring to asking for something seemingly innocent but with ulterior motives.

James even uses the word 'murder' here, which might cause us then to shrug off his words because surely we aren't willing to *murder* anyone over a new couch. But murder doesn't have to be physical, in this case. The New Testament equates hate and evil words with murder. And so if the way in which we go about meeting our desires is evil, then even the best of things can become sinful.

William Barclay writes: “The craving for pleasure in the end shuts the door of prayer. If a man’s prayers are simply for the things which will gratify his desires, they are essentially selfish and, therefore, it is not possible for God to answer them. The true end of prayer is to say to God, “Thy will be done.” The prayer of the man who is pleasure dominated is : “My desires be satisfied.”

*What do you really desire, deep down, and how are you asking God for those things?*

**B) Who do you really love?**

**4:4-6 (PAP)**

**You thought that you could stay married to God but chat with the dark side of the world on the side without any consequences, but in doing so you have walked away from your first love. When you entered into a dual-relationship with God and the sinful world, you set conflict between yourself and God. God has given you the Spirit, His presence that lives inside of you, and He is jealous for that Spirit and will not let you share that Spirit with another master/mistress. In your pride, you thought you could have it all, but God opposes you and gives grace to those who humbly stay faithfully with him.**

V. 4 begins with the exclamation “Adulterers!” The original Hebrew word is actually feminine, adulteress, and intentionally so. Many times throughout the Old and New Testament the church is referred to as God’s bride or Christ’s bride. James, in this passage, is calling out the church for committing spiritual adultery by fooling around with the world. In doing so, he joins

the long line of Biblical writers that accuse the people of God stepping out on their relationship with Him to flirt with the sins of the world.

**Hosea 9:1:** “Do not rejoice, O Israel! Do not exult as other nations do; for you have played the whore, departing from your God. You have loved a prostitute’s pay on all threshing floors.

**2 Corinthians 11:2-3:** I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. <sup>3</sup> But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

But who is the ‘world’ that the authors say we are committing adultery with? At its most basic meaning, ‘kosmos’ refers to order or arrangement, which speaks to the way that God ordered and arranged the world at the very beginning and called it ‘good.’ Kosmos, ‘world,’ used in James is the same word used in John 3:16 when Jesus tells us “For God so loved the world.” The word then can be something that God both loves and also wants us to stay away from. Jesus also says in John 17:18 that we are being sent as missionaries into this same world that God loves. “*As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*”

What does this dual-meaning tell us then? The world that God ordered and loved is also filled with persons and forces that are decidedly against God. And when we decide that we are no longer serving God in sharing the Gospel with this world but instead serving the world by following our own selfish desires,

then we have left our first love. Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:24, ‘no one can serve two masters.’ We know this is true, yet we try, all of the time, to juggle our relationship with God and our selfish want to dabble in the sinful lifestyle of the world.

James also tells us that God is jealous for His beloved, and that in His jealousy He does pursue us. But if we in our pride decide we can somehow serve both God and the world, then He will turn away from us. God will reject our lukewarm, half-hearted, and lackluster commitment. **So, who do you really love?**

**C) How much time do you really have?**

**4:13-17 (PAP)**

**You’ve grown accustomed to planning for the future because you like the control. You think that tomorrow is guaranteed, but the truth is, you have no idea if tomorrow will even come. It is like the morning fog rising above the trees, which may seem so thick and sure for a while but quickly dissipates when the sun comes to full bloom. Instead, say to yourself “We will do this if it is in God’s will, whatever that may be.” For now, you brag because you think you know everything and are in control. Well that’s fine, but hear this. If you know what is right but you fail to do it, you are sinning.**

**James 4:13-15 (MSG) <sup>13-15</sup> You don’t know the first thing about tomorrow. You’re nothing but a wisp of fog, catching a brief bit of sun before disappearing.**

We’ve already gone over this; that we have no guarantee of time or the future in spite of our best efforts to plan ahead, and we

can each surely think of an example of this. The quick answer to the question “How much time do you really have?” is “less than you think.” So, the challenge we are faced with is this: **what will we do with the time we’ve been given?**

#### **D) What should you really do? (vv. 7-10)**

##### **4:7-10 (NRSV)**

*<sup>7</sup> Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*

##### **4:7-10 (PAP)**

**So what should you do, you who have wandered away? Lay yourselves down before God’s feet, stand behind his protective shield and resist the temptations of the evil one. The world will run away when it realizes you aren’t for sale. If you run to God, He will likewise run to you. Wash your hands and hearts clean of any stain of the world’s influence. Weep for your former self, wail that you were so far from God, and sink into your humiliation and God himself will lift you up.**

In vv. 7-10, James offers a series of commands to the church for what she should do with the time she has left in order to return to God. Submit, resist, draw near, cleanse and purify, lament and humble yourselves. Let’s quickly consider what each of these mean.



**Submit:** When a person decides that they want to be baptized, one of the questions that is asked as a part of the ceremony is “Do you proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of your life.” Truthfully, we have a much easier time with allowing Jesus to save us than we do with making him Lord of our lives. Salvation is about the reward we receive, Lordship is about freely giving up control of our lives over to God. This is what it means to submit, returning control back over to God.

**Resist:** When we resist, we are actively rejecting the seduction of the world; to all of the ways that we may have been so easily persuaded away from God we say “Enough.” This is not passive resistance, this is taking an active stance.

**Draw Near:** This goes along side of submission, we are drawing near again to God as our Father, our savior, our husband, and we are coming under His Lordship but also protection from those things that would tempt us.

**Cleanse and Purify:** God always gives us opportunities to be forgiven of our sins, of those things that bring us the deepest guilt and shame. All we have to do is ask, and we can be made clean from any stain. There is nothing in this world so dirty from which God can't make us clean.

**Lament and Humble:** This means to mourn for the reality that we have been so far away from God, and to let go of our prideful arrogant attitudes that we've got it all figured out and can do it by ourselves. When we weep over our past selves and lower ourselves in humility, God can then lift us up.

Submit, resist, draw near, cleanse and purify, lament and humble yourselves. This is how we return to God, and there is no better time to start these things than now.

### **Conclusion:**

So what do we learn from James chapter four? If we hope to live lives following after our deepest Godly desires, then can only serve God, not the world. But the reality is that all of us face temptations everyday from the world that distract our attention away from God and cause us to chase after our selfish desires. And so we have to actively resubmit ourselves to Him and resist evil. Because our time on earth is fleeting, and no matter what our plans may be, we don't really know how long we have. The hard lesson of all of this is that we are never going to be free from the influence of the world, no matter how hard we try. And we will constantly be having to choose to return to God after committing spiritual adultery. This is reflected in the words from that classic hymn "Come Thou Fount" where the writer says "*Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.*" We are prone to wander, it is part of our sinful human nature. But we also serve a jealous God who will never stop pursuing us and will always welcome us back if we choose to return.

In the book of Hosea, God commanded the prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute Gomer, who over and over again leaves her loving husband to return to her sinful lifestyle. But every time she does God commands Hosea to go and find her, as a reminder that His love for His people is unending, in spite of their lack of faithfulness.

How much time do we have? Less than we think; so this very day, seek what you really desire, turn away from selfishness and temptation, and return to the one who truly loves you.