Session 8: James 4:1–12

OPEN

Have you ever had a humiliating, or at least humbling, experience that you've learned to laugh at now? Tell us about it.

How did you feel at the time?

READ

Read James 4:1–12.

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 8: *James 4:1–12* (10 minutes).

DISCUSS

Before we dig into the text, let's talk about that video. **Why do you think they shot this part in the prison at Alcatraz?**

Did it add a particular meaning or feeling to the things that Francis Chan was saying?

This is a violent, ugly, selfish section. It's not easy to hear. But it reminds us how dependent we are on the grace of God.

According to verse 1, where do fights and quarrels come from?

In the video, Francis said,

> It's about this emptiness. It's about fulfillment in something other than God...passions waging war in you—like a frustration. Like, "I want this. I'm not fulfilled." And you've just got to get it...You never really ask God to fulfill you.

How do you feel about the word "murder" in verse 2? Does that surprise you? Do you think it belongs there? Were these people really killers?

Some scholars have suggested that it's just a misspelling in the Greek. Change one letter and it means "envy." But maybe James is a great speller, and he means exactly this. Let's look deeper.

In verses 2–4 there are three words that are also found in the Ten Commandments. **Can you find them?**

PEEK AT THE GREEK

The Greek words translated “murder” (*phoneuo*), “covet” (*zeloo*), and “adulterous” (*moichalis*) are the same words (or forms of the same words) found in the Ten Commandments in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (The Septuagint)—the version of the Bible that James’ readers would have known.

Do you think this is intentional? Why would James want to tell his readers how they were breaking the Ten Commandments?

GO DEEPER

Learn more about commandment-breaking in the following Bible passages.
Matthew 5:21–22, 27, Matthew 19:16–21; Romans 2:21–23; James 2:10–11

In Matthew 5, what new view of the commandments did Jesus give?

In Matthew 19, what did Jesus ask the young man to add to his commandment-keeping?

How do the statements in Romans 2 and James 2 match up? What are these two writers saying?

Remember that James' original readers were most likely of Jewish descent. They would have learned the Ten Commandments from childhood. Note also that James has been tracking along with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. So maybe James is doing a Jesus-thing here. Jesus said it's not enough to avoid murder—avoid hate. Don't just abstain from adultery—abstain from lust. And if you're a young tycoon looking to buy eternal life, don't just keep the commandments—give to the poor. James is probably writing to Pharisee-like people who pride themselves on keeping the law, but they bad-mouth everyone who doesn't. James has already said that breaking one point of the law breaks them all. So the hatred they have is just like killing, and the desire they have is just like adultery, and their covetousness leads them to pray for things they shouldn't have. Their values are all messed up. James wants them to stop pretending they're good and instead humble themselves before God.

What do verses 2–3 tell us about the spiritual life of James's audience?

When they *did* ask God for things, what do you think they were asking for?

What can this teach us about prayer?

We often try to find formulas to figure out how prayer works. Let's see if we can take a different approach. The people on the receiving end of this epistle were (a) not asking God for what they wanted and, (b) when they asked, they asked with selfish motives. So we can assume that prayer wasn't an important part of their spiritual lives. They ignored God until they needed Him as a gofer. This is not what prayer is supposed to be.

So what *is* prayer supposed to be?

Is verse 4 saying that we shouldn't be friends with non-Christians? What is it saying?

GO DEEPER

Learn more about friendship with the world in the following Bible passages.
Matthew 6:24; John 14:16–17; 1 John 2:15–17; Romans 12:2

How would you define "world" as it appears in these verses?

If God loves the world (John 3:16), why shouldn't we (1 John 2:15)?

What sort of "transformation" (Romans 12:2) is required to keep us from thinking as the world does?

How do these verses enhance your understanding of James 4:4?

Verse 5 is just hard to figure out. Scholars have difficulty with it. It looks like a quotation, but no one can find it. And what does it mean? Who is "yearning" and what "spirit" is being referred to? (The word can mean either the Holy Spirit or the human spirit.) In context, it might mean something like this: "God longs for a loving relationship with us. In fact, He has put a spirit in us for the sole purpose of connecting with His Spirit. But we have strayed. We have been like an adulterous spouse, being more interested in the values of the world than in what God cares about."

So just when we're lined up for a smackdown from our holy God, what do we get in verse 6?

Francis painted the picture like this,

> Maybe you've spent your life pursuing these other things and you've missed out on this relationship. [James] says well that's OK. He'll give you more grace. But at this point humble yourselves. Because God opposes the proud but He gives grace to the humble. So right now, quit being arrogant, defending why you were pursuing this, just humble yourselves. God will give you grace. Humble yourself. Don't get arrogant.

Why? How can this happen?

What is our best response to this? How can we access God's grace?

In the next few verses, there are nearly a dozen things we are told to do. **What are they?**

Leader: *If you have a whiteboard, jot them down as people find them. Wherever necessary, ask, "What does this mean?" or "How can we do this?"*

Can you find a common theme here?

GO DEEPER

Learn more about our responses to God's grace in the following Bible passages. Proverbs 3:6 (NIV); 1 Peter 5:9; Hebrews 10:22; Psalm 24:3–6; Matthew 5:4; Joel 2:12–14; Matthew 23:12

How do these verses help you understand the list of responses in James 4?

How can we "cleanse our hands" and "purify our hearts"?

Why should we turn "joy to gloom"? Is it wrong to be joyful?

How will God "exalt" us?

In verses 11–12, James gets back to the main charge he's been making all along: These people are speaking badly. They are slandering others, judging them too harshly. Here he sounds a lot like Jesus in Matthew 7:1 and Paul in Romans 2:1. When you judge others, you condemn yourself. Leave the judging to God.

LAST WORD

Things are getting a bit clearer as we get deeper into the book of James. We're learning more about the people James is writing to. They seem to consider themselves religious, and they're proud of that. They even criticize others who are not as religious as they are. And yet, even in this act of judging others, they are revealing how far from God they themselves are. Every time they open their mouths, they're slandering others. As a result, there are quarrels and fights. They seem more interested in building their own status than in loving their brothers and sisters.

Aren't you glad we're not like that?

Wait. Don't answer that. As soon as we say it's everyone else's problem and not ours, then it becomes our problem. The solution is not to argue better or to prove that we're right and others are wrong. The solution is to humble ourselves, to admit where we have fallen short, to pray for the things that God cares about, to mourn over our sinfulness, to receive God's grace.

LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Humble Prayer: In biblical times they wore rough sackcloth and sprinkled ashes on themselves to come humbly before God. What could you do to show God (and remind yourself of) your humility? Kneel? Wear a dirty shirt? Put soil on your face? The specifics don't matter as much as your attitude. Take a good long time to listen to God. Ask about the things He cares about. Ask what He wants for you. Confess your sins and receive His forgiveness. Ask again for wisdom.

Memorization: Learn James 4:7–8.

Peacemaking: Are there "fights and quarrels" in your life? If you're not seeing eye to eye with someone, do what you can to set
that relationship right.

Service: Find a humble way to serve your church or community. Clean up, fix up, help those who routinely get neglected. This is not about you getting props for a good deed, but about showing the love of God to others.