James 4:1-10

The Traits of a Righteous Man’s Prayer Part 1

**4 What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is the source not your pleasures that wage war in your body’s parts? 2 You lust and do not have, so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, so that you may spend what you request on your pleasures. 4 You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. 5 Or do you think that the Scripture says to no purpose, “He jealously desires the Spirit whom He has made to dwell in us”? 6 But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” 7 Submit therefore to God. But resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Come close to God and He will come close to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be miserable, and mourn, and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy into gloom. 10 Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.**

Good morning! Please open your Bibles to the fourth chapter of the Epistle of James. Today we will be discussing verses 1-10 which deal with the topic of prayer. James begins the passage by telling his readers the reasons why their prayers are not being answered by God, then be begins to explain what the traits of a righteous prayer are that God will listen to and answer. As we begin today, I would like to ask a question, why, in your opinion, is there so much division and hostility among followers of Christ today? Christians have bitter arguments and disagreements over many things. Sometimes these arguments are because we have different perspectives on how to interpret a passage of Scripture or we have a differing opinion on how to address an issue impacting society. Whether the disagreements among Christians deal with theology or social situations James tells us that the primary reason why there is so much disunity in the body of Christ is because of the pleasures that wage wars in our bodies. He is referring to the impact that sin and the depravity of our hearts has on the relationships that exist among followers of Christ. Last week we discussed how the wisdom of God is much different than the wisdom of man. Today as we begin chapter 4, we will learn how to use the wisdom God has given us to pray in a way that is pleasing to Him.

In verse 2 James gives the answer as to why there is so much division and quarrelling among the followers of Christ. Firstly, he says those quarrels are the result of lust and envy that is present in the heart of every person. In this verse the word lust is used to describe a very strong desire for something. All of us desire things that we want to have because we think that by having that one thing, we will be happy or we will finally be satisfied. So, when we crave for something, but do not get it, that results in us being angry and then doing whatever we have to do to get that one thing. This could be money, power, prestige, or anything else that we think will make our lives complete. James mentions that when we don’t get that one thing we desire so badly it can lead to someone taking such an extreme action as murder. Have you ever heard of a situation where someone wanted something so bad that they were willing to murder in order to get it? One such situation in Scripture is King David, who had the husband of Bathsheba murdered because he wanted to have his wife. This murder happened because David decided that he had to do whatever was possible to obtain her as his own. The second reason why there are quarrels among people is because of envy, which is the desire to have something that belongs to someone else so badly that the desire results in fighting because of that frustration. The other word for envy that is more commonly used today is jealousy. The emotion of jealousy has caused people to do some rather extreme things so they could have the same level of monetary value or possessions that someone else has. This is known as the keeping up with the Jones’s situation. The Apostle is telling his readers that because of lust and jealousy there are conflicts among God’s people which eventually leads to division, anger and disunity in the body of Christ.

At the end of verse 2 he makes a very powerful statement when he says that people do not have because they do not ask. This is the beginning of the part of the passage where James will be discussing what the traits are of a righteous man’s prayer. So, what does James mean when he says that people do not have because they do not ask? The first issue that is being addressed here is the fact that many people do not experience answer to prayer because they are not praying to God in the first place. If someone ever wonders why they have not been receiving from God what they want that is because they are refusing to commune with God through prayer. The reason that God wants us to pray to Him is because this opens the lines of communication between ourselves and Him. Scripture teaches that prayer is not just something that God would like us to do, it is something that He commands us to do. Where exactly do we find this teaching in Scripture? Let us go to the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel chapter 12 verse 23 which reads “Furthermore, as for me, far be it from me that I would sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; but I will instruct you in the good and right way.” Samuel says in this verse that it is a sin against God not to pray for others. Also, in the New Testament Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Thessalonians chapter 5 verse 15 he teaches them to “Pray without ceasing.” Prayer is something that we are commanded to continually do in our lives. It is such an important discipline of faith that Jesus even gave us the Lord’s Prayer to use daily as we commune with God. Therefore, James says that the first reason people do not receive what they need is because they do not ask God by refusing to pray to Him.

Next, in verse 3 James says that people are not receiving what they desire because those desires are based upon sinful motives. The first aspect of the question we need to discuss is what are people desiring? If they are only desiring what is going to satisfy their natural greed and selfishness these earthly needs can never be satisfied. I have often used this illustration with students when I have taught economics. The question goes like this “Is there ever an amount of money someone can have that will make them completely satisfied?” Every student has said the same thing in response to the question. All of them said that no matter how much money someone has they always want more. If that is the case then James is confirming this when he says that people are always dissatisfied because they never get everything they want if they only desire earthly treasures and the things of this world. Here is what the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon said regarding the lust for earthly treasures ***“This is the tragic irony of the life lived after worldly and fleshly desires: it never reaches the goal it gives everything for. This fundamental dissatisfaction is not because of a lack of effort: ‘If the lusters fail, it is not because they did not set to work to gain their ends; for according to their nature they used the most practical means within their reach, and used them eagerly, too.’”*** Spurgeon is reminding us that eagerly trying to obtain enough money or earthly treasures to satisfy our desires is an empty venture. We will never be satisfied if that is all we truly desire. Therefore, the point James is making is that people are indeed praying to God for the things they desire, but they are not praying for the right things.

What we learn in verse 3 is that those who pray to God only desiring to receive things that will be used to satisfy their earthly selfish desires will not receive what they ask for. This brings up a point that many people do not like to hear, but the fact is that God does not answer every prayer. He does not answer certain prayers because those prayers do not have the goal of obtaining things that are within the will of God. It is important for all to remember that God is not a vending machine who will just provide us everything we ask for just because we pray to Him asking for it. When a prayer is made with selfish intention these prayers will not be answered by God. If God is just a last resort and is prayed to when things are not going as someone has planned then God is nothing more than a crutch. When we pray, we need to remember the words of Christ in His prayer when He says “Thy kingdom come Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Prayer is an opportunity to connect with the Creator of the universe who has shown His love for us through Christ. Rather than demand of Him things that are not in His will let us ask for His will to be done in our lives as well as in the lives of others.

Continuing to verse 4 we read that it is a form of adultery to be a friend of the world rather than a child of God. James is making the bold statement that being in love with the world makes someone an enemy of God. If someone comes to God in prayer without acknowledging Him as the Lord and Savior of their life then their prayer will be polluted with selfish ambition and greed. ***“We must remember that the purpose of prayer is not to persuade a reluctant God to do our bidding. The purpose of prayer is to align our will with His, and in partnership with Him, to ask Him to accomplish His will on this earth” (Dave Guzik).***

Now that we have identified why prayers are not answered by God, let us transition to what kind of prayer is respected and answered by God. For the sake of time today we will discuss the first two traits and then we will conclude next week with the last five. In verse 5 James makes the point that the Holy Spirit is yearning for us to have a friendship with God and seek His will for our lives. This yearning of the Holy Spirit is calling those who are indwelt with Him to cling to God rather than remain a friend of the world. In the pages of the Old Testament God says of Himself that He is a jealous God because He desires for His people to be totally committed to Him just like He was to them. When He gave the Ten Commandments to the people He told them in Exodus chapter 20 verse 5 why they should not worship the false gods of the Canaanites “You shall not worship them nor serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, inflicting the punishment of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me,”. God was telling the people that if they worship other Gods His jealousy would burn deeply and that they would receive His wrath. Just like this, the Holy Spirit jealousy yearns that those He lives in will continually cling to God and stay in communion with Him through prayer. God wants His people to stay connected with Him through prayer.

In verse 6 we learn about the first trait of a righteous prayer. James says that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. When someone lives in obedience to the Word of God and communes with Him in prayer the Holy Spirit gives more grace to that person. To receive this grace and peace we must have a humble attitude towards God rather than a prideful or selfish heart. Now how can this humility be shown to God in our prayers? Rather than approach God with pride expecting Him to answer prayers because we think that we are good people, we need to approach God with the humility knowing that everything God does for us is a gift. God is so great and we are so low, this is the grace God gives us all because He elevates us to the position of a son or daughter despite the many times we sin against Him. Therefore, the first trait of a righteous prayer is humility.

In verse 7 we are given the second trait of a righteous prayer. We are commanded to submit to God and resist the devil. Now what does James mean when He says we need to submit to God? He means that we must surrender who we are to Him and allow Him to be the king of our lives trusting that He will guide us in the ways that are right for us. Spurgeon provides 5 reasons why we should submit to God: 1. He created us, 2. His rule is good for us, 3. Resistance to Him is futile, 4. Submission to Him is essential for our salvation and 5. This is the only way to have peace with God. Resisting the devil is also important because if we are submitting to God we cannot serve our other worldly passions at the same time. The Apostle Paul encourages the believers in Ephesus to put on the full armor of God so that they may resist the attacks of the devil (Ephesians 6:13). Trait number 2 is to submit yourself to God and resist the temptations of the devil. When we resist the devil, he will flee!

Today we have discussed why there are times when God does not answer prayer as well as identify the first two traits of a righteous prayer. What we are discovering here is that when someone approaches the throne of God there is an appropriate attitude that one needs to bring with them. This is important because having the right attitude makes all the difference when asking God to intervene in our lives. Next week we will look at the last five traits and then we will bring this passage to a conclusion. This week let us make it a goal to approach the Lord every day in prayer asking that His will would be done in every situation. May we also drop our pride and selfish agenda so that the perfect will of God may be manifested in our lives. Please join me in a word of prayer.