

Winning the Warfare of Heart Idolatry

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Introduction

Who can forget the story in Genesis where Jacob wrestled with the angel throughout the night and how, later on, God directed Jacob to return to the land of Canaan. Remember him finally meeting his brother Esau again and afterward settling in Canaan with his family. In Genesis 35, in obedience to God's command, Jacob did return to Bethel where God had met him many years before. As he and his family prepared to journey there, he said to them all, "Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments: and let us arise, and go up to Bethel." Jacob was aware that some of them had brought along idols from Padanaram, where they had lived before. To Jacob, serving idols and serving God could not go together. So he commanded them to put away these false gods.

The Lord Jesus says essentially the same thing in Matthew 6:24 when He warns, "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon." Mammon is another word for worldly wealth. Yet whether our idol is money or power or anything else, that idol, embraced in the heart, puts us in direct opposition to God. This is what James says in James 4:4, "Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God."

Let us take this opportunity to identify and seek, by God's grace, to root out the idols of our heart which defile our conscience and hinder communion with the Lord.

Let us consider the first ten verses of James 4:1-10 under the theme, "Winning the Warfare of Heart Idolatry," with three points: the character and cause of this warfare; the effects of this warfare; and the victory over this warfare.

The Character and Cause of This Warfare

The Book of James is a unique, compact, and very practical epistle. At the same time, it is a searching one. The fourth chapter, in which our text is found, speaks against strife among the brethren, about judging one another, and about the need

for caution when speaking about future plans. It is the first of these subjects, strife among the brethren, which we want to examine now.

The text begins, "From whence come wars and fightings among you?" The apostle isn't talking here about the world. He's not asking why there are literal wars and why nations are at enmity with each other. He is talking about us, about God's church, about Christians, Let's pause to think about that.

How much strife is in our life? How often is there anger in our heart or home? Are voices ever raised? Are there arguments between family members? Are we ever impatient with others?

Children, do you ever argue, quarrel, or become impatient with your brother or sister? Do you ever talk back, grumble or complain to, disobey or unwillingly obey your parents?

Husbands and wives, are you ever unloving to each other? Do you ever speak cutting remarks to one another or display, perhaps, impatience or anger toward each other? Do you ever employ the "silent treatment" or "cold shoulder" approach to your spouse or someone else?

Parents and children, are you ever involved in arguments with one another, showing disrespect, anger, or venting frustration? Is there impatience at such times? Are unloving comments made?

The apostle James doesn't ask if there are wars and fightings among us. Taking it for granted that there are, he asks of their origin. Where does this strife come from?

What would be your answer? "It's that wife of mine." "It's my husband." "It's my father or mother, brother or sister. That's who is to blame!" "It's that someone at work or school, this or that son or daughter."

James says it's none of the above. "None of the above? Why, how does he know? He should be at our house for five minutes, then he'd think differently!" Before we are too hasty, let us remember that this text is not the uninformed opinion of an ordinary man who lived some two thousand years ago. This is the Word of God, the God who made us, who sees and knows all things. Our text is not the opinion of man but the inspired truth of God!

Where does this strife come from? These wars? James writes, “Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?” They come, says the Lord, from within you, “even of your lusts that war in your members.” The wars and fightings on the outside come from warfare on the inside. They come from desires-strong, even passionate desires-pleasures, and lusts.

We realize that desire, even strong desire, is not in itself sin. God created us fully capable of desiring. This ability was a gift to man. What a wonderful thing it is if we have a healthy appetite, if we have a desire to spend meaningful time with our spouse and children, etc. But in the text, James is not actually talking about our desires themselves, as if desiring is the problem. Nor is he actually talking about the object of our desire. Although it is true that we should desire only good things, that is not what James is writing about here. Instead, and most importantly, he is writing about what we do with our desires—what place or importance they have in our life, in our heart.

What does James say is happening with these desires and pleasures? “They war in your members.” These desires and pleasures are warring. Literally, they engage in conflict. They are fighting and wrestling. What are these desires fighting against? They are fighting against God.

Let me borrow an illustration from an instructor trying to describe this warfare for his class. Right desires are those that are held in a hand that is open and upturned toward God. By doing this, we acknowledge that we receive all from Him. We also offer all to Him. This was the very attitude of Job when he said, “The LORD gave and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21). When our hand of desire is open, then we leave the objects of our desire, as it were, in God's hands. We trust that He gives us what and how much He knows is best for us. But what's happening in the heart that James is describing is the closing of that hand into a clenched fist. Under this latter scenario, there is now a competition, of sorts, in our heart. Who has control of our heart at this moment, God or our desires? If our greatest desire is truly God, we can more easily open our hand to His wise providence, mercy, and grace. But because we begin closing our hand of desire against Him, warfare breaks out.

We need to realize that this clenching of our desires doesn't reach warfare-pitch

intensity right away. Desires, we said, are not evil in and of themselves, so long as the object is not sinful. But as we begin to clench our fist, we start to cultivate within our heart a sense of need. I need this object of my desire. How many of us have ever nurtured a desire after a different car, for example, into a need for a vehicle that goes far beyond the basic requirement of transportation? If we continue to feed this sense of need, we develop expectations. We then begin to look to our employer, our spouse, or to someone else to meet our expectations.

Consider, as an example of this process of escalation, the ordinary desire to relax after work. As I focus on this desire, I begin to convince myself that I need that break, In fact I need, even deserve that break right now! Of course, when I walk in, I fully expect those around me to allow for, to create an atmosphere for that rest I am craving. What is the next step? My expectation soon translates into a demand I must have that break! And as we all know, expectations and demands readily lend themselves to disappointments. My expectation, my demand, is unfulfilled. I can even "love" someone because he or she meets my expectations, supplies my demands. I can be disappointed or even resent someone because they don't. How often that which started off as a simple desire, perhaps even a lawful one, was stoked by a heart fully set on the fulfillment of that desire until the desire finally culminates in a demand accompanied by threats. and even punishments. "There will be results if you don't meet this need," becomes the language of our heart, our looks, and our speech. A heart like this is the birthplace of the cold shoulder, the silent treatment, the angry outburst—the birthplace of warfare.

James provides us an abbreviated description of this process in 1:15, "But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust. [passions/desires] and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived [is fed/accommodated], it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death (destruction/warfare/death)." In this whole wretched process the problem was not outside of us but within us. It was not my wife, not my child, not my boss, but my own idolatrous heart, clasping and clinging to my desire, which caused the warfare.

Consider what sad outcome might have resulted if the Apostle Paul had held tightly to his desire that the thorn in his flesh be removed. Instead of learning to adjust his expectations to God's wise plan, he might have, in a moment of

frustration, risen up in self-pity or even rebellion against God's chastening. He would have entirely missed the blessed lessons we read about in this precious and encouraging account (1 Cor. 12:7ff).

What is it to elevate desires in this manner, except idolatry? Is not idolatry worshipping the creature more than the Creator (Rom. 1:25)? Is not idolatry closing our heart tightly around our desires instead of opening the hand of our heart upward to God?

Idolatry, both in the Old and New Testaments, is the object of God's singular hatred, for it seeks to pervert the very purpose for which He created us, namely to know, love, and glorify Him. In idolatry, we become the object of worship and the creation becomes our means of choice to accomplish this. God freely gave His only-begotten and beloved Son to come into this world and to die in order to restore us to that original purpose. Transformed by His grace, we yield all that we are, and seek to employ all that's around us, for His glory.

"From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?" What are the results of such tightly held desires? Warfare without and warfare within. It is exactly because we have closed the fist around our desires that our hand remains a fist toward God and others in our life. Perhaps a brief case study, a vignette, will help illustrate how this process looks in daily life.

Let's say a favorite idol is my love of comfort, love of ease. Instead of yielding my day, my itinerary, my schedule, my workload to God, I instead seek to close my hand around this idol, my comfort. In so doing, I become unwilling to part with this treasured desire without a battle, even if God should require it of me for my good.

So how would this idol cause internal and external warfare? While I am tightly grasping my love of comfort and ease, then I shun as many opportunities that threaten that ease as possible. I might avoid evangelistic opportunities, turn from an encounter with a stranger, lest these upset my beloved ease. I might try to bury myself in my work so that I don't have to deal with children squabbling at home, leaving my wife to take care of that as much as possible. Wrapping myself in my comfort, I won't have to deal with my children's discipline as much as I could or

should. Maybe love of ease translates into less meaningful interaction with my wife. When I keep things at a surface level, engage in small talk, limit myself to brief encounters ---this insulates me from vulnerability and involvement. It's easier just to skate along in shallow relationships than to really put effort into cultivating them meaningfully.

Maybe my work is that which disturbs my peace. So I avoid it or excuse myself for doing poorly, for being lazy. I might tend to over-delegate to others what I should do myself, so that I could enjoy more "rest." Maybe I start living for weekends and vacations-do the minimum required. Whose company will I prefer? Enablers. These will help me be at ease, will not criticize or warn, will leave me alone or do my work for me. When my wife takes over all that I don't want to do, I "love" her. When she reminds me of my responsibility, I become resentful.

It is sad enough to consider the damage this kind of life does to our horizontal, person-to-person relationships, but the damage is not limited to this. We said that this kind of life is idolatry. This love of ease, or whatever other idol occupies the throne of my heart, adversely affects my relationship with God too. Consider the vertical fallout that also flows from this love of ease.

Since true prayer can sometimes be laborious, my idol prompts me to mechanize or minimize it. Will I not tend to become slothful in every spiritual endeavor? Will I not gravitate toward the bare necessities, for example, my body occupying a place in church while my mind is elsewhere? Will not my devotions be reduced to mere mechanized apparitions? Wrestling with temptation, fighting indwelling sin, winning others to Christ-these all require me to exert effort, to leave the comfortable idolatry I have carefully nurtured. At bottom, so long as I cling to my idol, I am far more interested in my comfort and ease than in God's glory and the growth of His kingdom. I'd rather sit in my self-constructed kingdom of ease than show compassion to or get involved with a sinner who appears to be on his way to hell!

This brief vignette sketches but one idol of the heart; one desire held with clenched fist. How many there can be in our life! A tightly held desire to control things around me can lead to anxiety and worry, prodding me to manipulate others or events so I can run things myself. This same idol fosters pride, even a spirit of

independence from God. What lies at the bottom of such a desire to control? Unbelief that is demonstrated by my unwillingness to trustingly yield my life's circumstances to God's sovereign control.

What are a few typical heart idols? Consider the fear of man, a craving to please others, gluttony or laziness or sensuality, a desire to control or need to be controlled. The list is practically endless. God calls us all to examine our own heart, praying for His Spirit's light and guidance as we do. Our aim is to discover those idols of the heart that we might be clenching tightly, idols we have been unwilling to give over into our Savior's sovereign and gracious hands.

To spur us on to this work, let us, in the second place, consider some of the effects of this warfare.

The effects of this warfare.

"From whence come wars and fightings among you...ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." In verse one, James asks where the strife, the arguments, the anger, and the quarrels between us come from? They arise from the war within, he answers,

Look at the words the Spirit inspired James to write. In verse 1 we have "wars" and "fightings." In verse 2 we have "kill," "fight," and "war." Is the Spirit exaggerating by using such words? Certainly not! Consider each word.

"Wars and fightings among you"—strife, quarreling, disputing—these are the fruits of idolatry. Wars between nations are only just grand extensions of the smoldering battles of idolatry in individual men's hearts. But keep in mind that James is addressing church-going Christians. "Lusts that war in your members." Literally, these are pleasures that do military service, lead the army, go out to battle. The outward strife comes from the general within, from lust, pleasure, tightly held desires. What else could account for warfare within a man's own heart, but his lusts, his desire for pleasures fighting against the striving of

of Heart Idolatry God's Spirit? Even competing lusts strive against each other for the mastery of the man.

“Ye lust, and have not.” The word lust here is different than the one used before. This word means to crave, to set one's heart on, to covet. “Ye kill and desire to have.” Ye murder, it literally says. It is not the desire that kills, but it is you who kills in order to maintain this controlling idol within. Lest you think this word murder is too strong, just recall Jesus' teaching about murder in Matthew 5. What murders are committed by looks, anger, words, and even thoughts—all in the arena of the idolatrous heart!

Why do we thus murder? Because someone won't enable, won't assist us in serving our idols. Think how often we resent even a gentle reproof if it comes to us while we are indulging our idol. Children, did Mom or Dad ever ask you to do something right while you were in the middle of an exciting game or other activity? What was your immediate reaction? How did you feel at that moment? Doesn't complaining sometimes bubble up within you? Grumbling perhaps? Maybe even anger or rebellion? Or perhaps pleading, together with unwillingness? This is the fruit of idolatry going on within your heart.

“Ye kill and desire to have.” These words “desire to have” indicate a real zeal for, a setting of one's heart on, a jealousy over some object or desire. Think of smoking, drinking, drug use or any other habitual sin. People sometimes describe a sense of feeling driven by their cravings for such things. How vehemently we may try to defend them, be jealous over them, and guard them. But so it is with all heart idols. We naturally justify them or make excuses for them, watch over them, and protect them from God. Notice that James, in this whole passage, doesn't once say what that desire is that we are fighting for, lusting after, or craving. It is not the object he has in view, but rather the idolatrous state of the heart. It is any desire rivaling our desire after God that God hates. In Exodus 34:14 God said, “Thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”

Let each of us search out these idols within us, whether they be lawful or sinful desires in themselves. Let us closely examine whether these desires are controlling us, demanding service from us—if they are things that rival God. This was what

Paul was writing about in 1 Corinthians 6:12, "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any' and again in 1 Corinthians 9:27, "But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway."

We expend such effort to protect, feed, and foster our idols, our tightly held desires. Are they fulfilled after all this warfare and strife? Are these desires fulfilling? No, says our text-mercifully not! What a blessing when God thwarts our idolatrous hearts! What would it be if He would simply allow us to gorge ourselves on all our idols? In verses 2 and 3 we read, "Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts."

All the lusting, the desiring, the striving—what's the end result? "Ye have not." Does this mean we never get our way? Never indulge our idols? No, it doesn't mean that. But we never get real fulfillment, true satisfaction from these idols. So often God either deprives us of our idol or He sours our enjoyment of it. Go back to the vignette about the love of ease. Perhaps I might feel guilty later on because I didn't finish what needed to get done, whittling away the time instead. This consequence, this guilt sours the idol. Or perhaps I come to see that my love of ease has hurt my child or spouse who so wanted my time and attention, time and attention I spent on myself, avoiding interaction with them. This kind of remorse sours the enjoyment of my idol.

Sometimes God drives us out of our false refuge, our idol, or He drives the idol out of us. How many, who supposedly couldn't give up smoking or drinking, suddenly were able to once God sent cancer, emphysema, or cirrhosis of the liver into their life. Sadly, we sometimes see these idols for what they are too late! Beloved, let us examine ourselves this very day and by the grace of God bury any known idols, as it were, even as Jacob did the idols of his own house in Genesis 35:4.

Notice at the end of verse two, James faults us for not praying. Appearing before God in prayer has a wonderful way of siphoning off our heart the things we

don't really need. In the scenario James was sketching, the Christian, at first, wasn't asking God. He was trying to force his own way, acquire for himself that which was desired. In verse three, some even prayed, James said, but still didn't receive what they sought? "Ye ask, and receive not." And why do they not receive? "Because ye ask amiss that ye may consume it upon your lusts."

Once a friend of mine asked me two questions. He said that I shouldn't answer the first until I heard the second. "What would you want God to give you?" His second question was, "What would you do with it if He gave it to you?" The first answer was easy to give. The second gave me pause for thought.

Did God create all things for our glory? Revelation 4:11 says, "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." So often, enamored as we are with our desires, we neglect this basic truth. We pray for a blessing on our food. We give thanks afterward for it. But how often do we use the strength and health we gain by it for sin? Think, for example, of athletes who use the great strength and agility God gives them to enrich themselves, bring themselves glory, while at the same time leading thousands of people into Sabbath desecration and idolization of sports figures. Think of the wisdom God gave men to invent things like TV and computers, and yet consider how pitifully these inventions are routinely used to promote sin. "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts."

So God is saying here that we can even ask Him for things that might be good in themselves, and yet because our motive in wanting them is wrong, He still withholds them from us. Think what this could potentially include. Perhaps you are praying for a wayward son or daughter, while even now you are still not teaching the ways of God to your other children who are still living under your roof. Perhaps you are praying for health and/or recovery, yet you have no serious intention that if you were restored you would seek or serve the Lord any more than you did before. Perhaps you pray for a blessing on your work at home or on the jobsite, yet you routinely spend an immoderate amount of the money you earn on luxury, pleasure, and self. Seeking satisfaction everywhere else, in everything else, except in God—perhaps God is now seeing to it that you will not find that

satisfaction anywhere except in Him. This is what James is writing about.

The greatest loss, however, is not just that God doesn't give us what we want. In verses 4 and 5, James writes, "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God. Do ye think that the Scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?"

Jesus Himself warned, "Ye cannot serve God and mammon [wealth]." Look at the names James uses--adulterers and adulteresses. He is not changing subjects here. Rather, he is telling us that serving our desires, holding tightly onto our dreams in opposition to God, is spiritual adultery. The word translated "friendship" can just as accurately be translated "love"—the love of the world is enmity with God. This is the same word that Peter used when saying to Jesus, "Thou knowest that I love thee." If I, congregation, were to love another woman besides my wife, you would be justifiably appalled, calling this adultery. In like manner, God will not suffer us to love this world, even lawful blessings, in opposition to Him. To do so, to hold onto our desires, cravings, and will tightly, is essentially renouncing His revealed will for us. This is "changing the truth of God into a lie, and worshipping and serving the creature more than the Creator" (Rom, 1:25). This is embracing something tighter to our heart and bosom than God. That is sin,

Are there any desires or fears ruling your life? Causing strife within and without? These must be brought out into the light, dear friend. They must be dealt with, mortified, and buried. We may not give place to any idols in our heart, for to do so is to give place to the devil and to dishonor God. Let us consider how we are to combat these idols in our last thought.

The victory over this warfare.

Is there a remedy for the wars and strife in our lives? James continues, "But he giveth more grace." Romans 5:20 assures us, "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." God's free favor and power are readily able to overcome internal idolatry. What are the key words in the verses that follow? "Humble yourselves," "submit yourselves," "resist the devil," "draw nigh to God," "cleanse your hands," "purify your hearts," "be afflicted, mourn, weep," and then again,

"humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord." What precious instruction this is!

Humility-what is it, in a practical sense? Is it not to take our rightful place before our God? Is it not to open up that clenched hand of ours to Him? This is what it means to submit ourselves to Him. It is to turn our heart to Him, not setting our desires and affections too much on anything temporal or earthly. It also means warding off temptations from without-"resist the devil." As the deceiver suggests to us so-called needs; as he tries to get us to need someone else's approval, for example; as he tries to get us to become more independent in self or less dependent on God; more anxious and less trusting; he is to be resisted, actively.

Putting off the old man, battling heart idolatry not only means repentance, "drawing nigh to God" in prayer, but it also means "cleansing our hands," that is, putting away sinful patterns of living and replacing them, by His Word and grace, with Christ-like patterns of thinking and living. To do this, we must know what God would have us to be like in our present setting and relationships. It is not enough to put off the old man and his deeds, but we need a clear picture of what putting on the new man looks like if we are to aspire after it.

Foremost in this pursuit, we need to ask daily for His direction lest we be tempted all over again to plot our own course. We need to ask daily for His grace to detect and strength to resist heart-held idols. This means to consciously ask each day, "Lord what wilt Thou have me to do today? What would please Thee the most? It means having a heart ready to respond to His direction and answers with prompt obedience, while being wary of the opposition of idols.

The word purify in "purify your hearts" means to cleanse morally. What can morally cleanse a human heart except the blood of Jesus Christ? What but the cross has the power to intimidate our heart idols into subjection? What but the fear of God can shrink the fear of man? What but faith can shrink away anxiety and worry?

Verses 9 and 10 speak of a total surrender of our hearts, agendas, and desires to God. It means we come off the throne and beseech God to ascend it instead. It means we stop feasting ourselves on our own craven images and delight ourselves rather in God our Maker and Savior. If we don't purpose to do battle at the heart level, don't be surprised if you gain but little progress in sanctification. In fact, you

may well question whether you are truly sincere about your religion at all. How can we approach God in true love if our heart is set on others? So let us not approach our God, our heavenly Husband, unless we have sought out, by His grace, the hidden idols of our heart, and finding them, renounce them.

Humility-this is the grace that affects the greatest change, and is prominent in this passage. This rarest and yet choicest of graces is found in richest abundance at the cross, in Christ Jesus. Let His blood be our main focus, at the very vanguard of our warfare against heart idolatry. This blood brings cleansing, and it has great power. By all means, "Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you." When we humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord, He shall lift us up (v. 10). May the temple of our hearts and lives be thoroughly purified so that the King may abide therein with joy. So shall the King greatly desire thy beauty. Amen.