

The War Within Us
James 4:1-6
Bellevue Baptist Church
July 19, 2026

One of my favorite Dr. Seuss stories is Yertle the Turtle. It's off the beaten path, not famous like The Cat in the Hat or Green Eggs and Ham, but this story has so many parallels with Scripture. It starts like this:

**On the far-away island of Sala-ma-Sond,
 Yertle the Turtle was king of the pond.
 A nice little pond. It was clean. It was neat.
 The water was warm. There was plenty to eat.
 The turtles had everything turtles might need.
 And they were all happy. Quite happy indeed.**

It's a little turtle paradise—called Sala-ma-Sond. All the citizens are quite content, until the king spoils it all. They were all happy...

**They were... until Yertle, the king of them all,
 Decided the kingdom he ruled was too small.
 "I'm ruler", said Yertle, "of all that I see.
 But I don't see enough. That's the trouble with me."**

At this moment, Dr. Seuss has stepped on all of our toes, has he not? Like good stories do, this tale reveals something about our own greedy hearts, does it not? There's a little Yertle in you—if you're honest. You too, have a hard time being happy with what you have. If you aren't careful, you'll turn out to be a power-hungry reptile ruled by appetite.

Yertle's ambition turns to obsession. One day, he commands the citizens of Sala-ma-Sond to stack themselves beneath him—one on top another, creating a tower of shells that lifts him higher. But every new height awakens new hunger. He wants more turtles stacked! They should give him no flack!

And then the day comes, the tower of turtles falls, and Yertle now is beneath them all.

**And today the great Yertle, that Marvelous he,
 Is King of the Mud. That is all he can see.
 And the turtles, of course... all the turtles are free
 As turtles and, maybe, all creatures should be.**

James 4 could have been the inspiration for that chilling children's book. James puts the mirror in front of my face when he says:

What is the source of wars and fights among you? Don't they come from your passions that wage war within you? ² You desire and do not have. You murder and covet and

cannot obtain. You fight and wage war. You do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and don't receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.

⁴ You adulterous people! Don't you know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? So whoever wants to be the friend of the world becomes the enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think it's without reason that the Scripture says: The spirit he made to dwell in us envies intensely?'

⁶ But he gives greater grace. Therefore he says:

**God resists the proud
but gives grace to the humble.'** **James 4:1-6**

Notice our passage begins with a probing question: What is the source of wars and fights among you? His answer is hard to hear: "The source is inside of you." There are three powers at work in our lives. The first is the war within.

Three Powers at Work In Our Lives

1. The desires within us. (vv. 1-3)

Scripture is packed with stories that speak to the human tendency to hoard power, and to have control.

In 2 Samuel, we meet David's son Absalom, who was born of Bathsheba—the woman with whom David had an adulterous affair. The poor kid entered the world as a result of his father's unrestrained cravings. And the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. As the young man grows, the inner-Yertle rears its head. He wants his father's throne, and he feeds that fantasy.

Behind his father's back, he started campaigning and meeting citizens at the city gates saying "You know, if I were in charge," and he played to his audience. If you read the story, it ends the same way as Sala-ma-Sond.

Absalom is found dead, hanging from his famously awesome hair—as he fled on horse from his father's army, his locks caught a low branch, and those who pursued him would thrust him through with spears. David wanted them to deal gently, but in the end, Absalom was destroyed by the unchecked cravings within him.

James is right. What causes conflict outside of us—it is often the war within us. And so, James begins this chapter by making his point clear—be very careful which cravings you feed. If a desire is from God—feed it. As Paul said to Timothy: Fan into flame the gift of God that is in you!

But, if that desire comes from darkness, if you know it is not from God, assume it's from the Enemy. He's trying to make an Absalom out of you. This Enemy, Jesus warned, wants to steal, kill, and destroy what the Lord wants to do with your life. He wants to take you to the Mud.

Let me pause here and make an important observation about the cunning nature of our spiritual foe. What do we know about Satan? Scripture describes the serpent as crafty. He is calculated, strategic, and patient. He looks at your life, and waits for an opening.

Recently, I came across an interesting detail about pickpockets in crowded train stations. Ironically, petty thieves prefer stations where large signs warn, **"Beware of Pickpockets."** You would think those signs would make travelers safer. In many cases, they make the thief's job easier.

As passengers step from the train, they see this sign, they pat the pocket holding their wallet. In a split second, they reveal exactly where their treasure is hidden. This is how a skilled pickpocket works. He hides in the shadows and waits for a sucker.

This is why Peter warned us with these words: *"Be sober-minded. Be alert. Your adversary the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour."* The reason the Enemy gains ground is because we stop killing the sin within.

That is why worship matters. That is why you should sit under the preaching of Scripture week after week. This is why you form alliances with those who seek holiness—small groups. When we drift from the Word, we become easy prey.

Now, from there, James does something interesting. He explains the two main reasons why we don't get what we want from God.

V.2: you do not have because you do not ask.

God doesn't grant the requests not made. In our self-reliance, we never stop to ask the Father for help.

Imagine a little girl at the amusement park, who catches from the corner of her eye, the cotton candy stand. There it is—the blue and pink dream. That little girl has no job. She has no money. She cannot have it on her own. What does she do? She says, "Grandpa, can I have some of that cotton candy?" And what does Grandpa do? He smiles real big because her parents aren't around. He happens to have some 401K in his pocket. It brings him joy to give his granddaughter something that she asks for.

Jesus says our heavenly Father loves to give good gifts to His children. And here, James says that so many blessings go unreceived, not because God is unwilling to give, but because we never humble ourselves enough to ask.

Now, we all know that God doesn't give us every material item we wish for. If that were true, we'd be spoiled rotten, but the Scripture makes it clear that our Heavenly Father wants us to bring our hopes Him. He wants us to give Him the opportunity to say yes or no. In some cases, you have not because you ask not.

But let's say you do ask. You pass that first test, but then you fail the second. What's that? V.3: *you don't receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.* It doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure that out. You want something that's not good for you. In many cases, you want something that is going to be bad for you.

Here is the problem that we humans have. The Lord sees the panoramic picture. He has perfect vision, with all the information past, present, and future. The Bible says that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. There is nothing hidden from his sight. The final book of the Bible, Revelation, makes it clear: God has written the end of the story already. So He knows this needs to go. He knows where you need to go.

He sees the panoramic picture, but little old us, with our weak eyes. We live our lives looking through the key hole. The Apostle Paul said, in 1 Cor. 13: Now I see through a glass dimly, but one day I shall see in full."

Why don't we get what we want? Because sometimes, where we see cotton candy; He sees the cavity. The thing you desire could lead you to destruction. This is why James says a little bit down the page...v.13...

¹³ Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." ¹⁴ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

He won't give us that which is outside His will.

So, to sum all this up: we humans have cravings. Some good, some bad. We should take them to God and let Him be the Guide.

Now, let's move onto the second power at work in our lives. There is the war within us, yes, but then, there is...

2. The world that woos us. (vv.4-5)

Look at v. 4: *⁴ You adulterous people! Don't you know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? So whoever wants to be the friend of the world becomes the enemy of God.*

The word adultery is often used in the Old Testament when Israel cheated on God by worshiping the fake gods of adjacent countries. This was a constant threat to the holiness of Israel—they kept taking the bait and bowing to Baal or Asherah or the flavor of the month.

This is essentially the message of Hosea. God tells the prophet Hosea to marry a woman that will prove unfaithful. Hosea's dysfunctional marriage would be a metaphor of God's relationship with His people. Hosea 3:1..

The Lord said to Hosea, “Go, show your love to a woman loved by someone else, who has been unfaithful to you. In the same way the Lord loves the people of Israel, even though they turn to other gods...” Hosea 3:1

What do we learn from this unusual Old Testament story? God is always faithful, even when we are not. His love for us is perfect. Ours is not. And James, here in v.4. reminds us that the human heart has not been altered since the far-off days of Hosea. When we get too cozy with the world, we are tempted to live atheistic lives.

Shockingly, the people most susceptible to fall are those who believe they’ve outgrown the need to be on guard. Even after decades of following Jesus, we should never say to ourselves, “I would never do that. I would never commit that sin. I thank God that I am not like those other people.” Don’t forget it was Peter, the most loyal to Jesus, who told the Lord that night: O, not I, Lord. I may be a lot of things, but never a traitor! t

And Peter had to learn that none of us is as strong as we think we are.

The Puritan John Owen, wrote a famous work on the importance of killing the weeds of sin that are always ready to grow in our hearts. He states that the wisest Christians keep killing sin. They know, if the heart is not tended, the weeds will grow higher than seems possible.

He wrote these words a couple hundred years ago.

Sin, if left alone, if not continually killed, will bring forth scandalous, soul-destroying sins. Sin aims at the utmost every time. Every unclean thought would be adultery, every covetous desire would be oppression, every thought of unbelief would be atheism, might it grow to its head. —John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*

The next time you look down on someone who has been caught in greed, remember there’s a sleeping miser inside you, waiting to wake. The next time you judge a person caught in deception, remember moments in your life when you covered wrongdoing by telling lies. There’s a little liar inside you wanting to come awake. While we live in these bodies, our feet are made of clay.

Without the Holy Spirit’s help, we can’t hold sin back—we quickly become a friend of the world, thus an enemy of God.

Now let's look at the next verse, verse 5. Because its a bit puzzling. James writes, *"Or do you think it's without reason that the Scripture says: The spirit he made to dwell in us envies intensely?"*

Those words are not found anywhere in Scripture. Yet, James makes it sound like he's quoting the Bible. “The Scripture says.” Most Bible scholars believe James isn't quoting one specific passage. Instead, he's summarizing a theme that runs throughout the Bible. It is this: apart from the grace of God, we want to trade places with other people. We envy intensely.

Now, I said much about envy last week, it came up in James 3, so I refer you to that message, but suffice it to say: Left unchecked, envy will eat you up.

Back in the first book of the Bible, in Genesis, we meet Cain who wanted what his brother Abel had. He envied intensely. Genesis 4:7, God says, “Cain...Sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Gen. 4:7).

What was God saying:: “Cain, kill this sin before it grows to a head. But he doesn’t listen, and sin takes him further than he ever thought he would go. He kills his brother, who he saw as a rival.

A few chapters later in Genesis, what do we see? The sin we see in Cain is now spreading across the human race. So much so, that God regretted making man, and resolves to wipe them out, starting afresh. Genesis 6:5:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. Gen. 6:15

When James says, “this spirit within us envies intensely,” he’s looking over the span of biblical history and summarizing—we must kill sin or it kills us.

Do not think that you are made of a special substance. The world will woo us, if we pay no attention to our hearts. Resist it, fight sin, confess sin— to God and to others. Don’t be woo’d.

Which leads us to the third power in our lives. The Good News at the tail end of his argument. There is a...

3. The grace that saves us. (v.6)

⁶ But he gives greater grace. Therefore he says: God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ James 4:1–6

So far, this passage has been so depressing. The lustful, envious, sinful desires that rage war against us. The world, ruled by the Prince of the Air, constantly casting lures in front of us. How can we overcome the odds?

Here’s the answer—We magnify the Lord in our lives.

Every time we enter this room to lift up the name of Jesus, we yank Yertle the Turtle from our own hearts. We silence the attitude of Absalom. We reject the whisper of Cain. As we serve the body of Jesus Christ, we kill our tendency to use people as stepping stones. *Whoever humbles himself, Jesus said, will be exalted. Conversely, whoever exalts himself will be humbled.”*

Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me. When you visit someone in the hospital. When you drop off a meal. When you pray with someone who is hurting. When you serve, your

attention shifts. You see another person's needs. Another person's burdens. Another person's story. And you discover that the way out of self-absorption is often through service.

James says that God pours out His grace on those who serve, those who continually make themselves small. "He resists the proud but gives grace to the humble." So there you have it—the three forces at work in our lives.

The desires within us.

The world that woos us.

The grace that saves us.

And thank God, His grace is greater than all of our sins.

Now with my time remaining, let me tackle some questions that rise from this text.

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

How do I resist the world's influence without withdrawing from the world?

There is a tension here that every Christian must learn to navigate. The mistake is usually made by drifting toward one of two extremes. On one side is the temptation to completely withdraw from the world. To isolate ourselves. To become monks. To avoid unbelievers altogether so that we won't be influenced by them. This person says, "All of my social needs, all of my relationships, are inside the church, so I have no need to know my neighbors, to show up in any way in their lives. The spiritually dead are dead to me: the church means everything to me. This is called cultural disengagement. But isolation isn't the answer.

Why? Because the premise is untrue. Other people don't cause you to sin. You are a first-class sinner all by yourself. As James has already said; The problem isn't with them. It's with you, the passions waging war within you.

And besides, this is not the way the Lord lived. Jesus dined with sinners and spent time with prodigals. He did not avoid all entanglements with worldly people. No, we are called to live like missionaries, but how far should we go?

On the opposite extreme of isolation, is saturation.

This is when Christians become chameleons. They try to be cool. They try to blend into the culture in order to relate. If they are around folks who use filthy language, they throw in a curse word or two, to mix. They reason: I must be profane to reach the profane. They get entirely cozy with culture.

But when you read the Bible, from the days of ancient Israel to the time of the New Testament church, we never see God lowering the bar of holiness.

To be holy means to be set apart, to be in the world, but not of the world. So when people look at our lives, we should feel a little weird, in the way we roll. We want unbelievers to say;

"Wait...You don't hate your enemies. You don't gossip about your coworkers? You won't throw the boss under the bus? You won't retaliate every time someone attacks you online? You don't cut corners in order to save a buck?"

The Bible calls this living above reproach.

One of the qualifications for a pastor—he must be one who “lives above reproach.” The word means “slippery.” When accusations come, and they will—at some point all leaders get attacked—when the accusations land, they slide off his back. They don’t stick. Why? Because his consistent life of integrity makes those things hard to believe.

That isn’t just the goal for pastors. It’s God’s desire for every believer. Not separation from people. Not imitation of people. Integrity and influence among people.

We are not called to retreat from the world. We are not called to resemble the world. We are called to shine in the world.

A Good-Hearted Skeptic Asks:

Isn’t James being a little overdramatic when he calls people ‘adulterers’? That sounds awfully harsh.

It’s true—cheating on a math quiz is not the same thing as cheating on your spouse. But think about adultery for a second. It always begins with this lie: *"No one will know."*

Not true. God knows. And eventually, other people will know. Adultery is the decision to satisfy a sinful desire and thinking it will remain a secret. That’s why James calls us adulterous when we let sin grow. Prov. 15:3, "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, watching over the wicked and the good."

Adultery is not a sudden choice, but something that’s been entertained. That’s why Jesus warns us about this form of entertainment. He said: “Every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” He is not saying that a sideways glance is the same as a secret night in a hotel—he’s saying that God sees more than what you do. He sees what you think.

The Apostle Paul said:

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. 1 Cor. 6:18

All sin is dangerous, but sexual sin leaves the worst scars. When the thought enters your mind, “No one will ever know,” be aware that you’re entertaining a lie.

A Student Asks:

If God opposes the proud, then why does it seem to get rewarded at school?

When I was in high school, it used to drive me crazy. The girls wanted to date the disrespectful guys who smarted off to the teachers. The Bible says God opposes the proud, but in the world, it seems the opposite.

But here's what you have to remember: God measures success differently than the world does. Think about King Saul in the Old Testament.

From the outside, he looked like the obvious choice to lead Israel. Scripture says, "*He stood a head taller than anyone else*" (1 Samuel 9:2). He had the appearance, the charisma, and the presence that woo'd the girls.

But when it came time to step forward as Israel's king, where was he? The people said, "Where is this chosen one?" *The Lord replied, 'There he is, hidden among the supplies.'*" (1 Samuel 10:22)

In the dog world, he looked like a Doberman, but to God, he was Chihuahua.

This is why it's so vital that, as a young person, you let Scripture inform the way you see the world. You want to put on God's glasses.

Don't envy the Sauls in your class. Those who have physical strength, but no spiritual strength. Here's my advice to you: build your spiritual strength. Aim at being a servant leader, not a social celebrity.

Twenty years from now, very few people will remember who the coolest kid in the graduating class of 2027 was. High school may have rewarded disrespect but the real world will not.

Years ago, a man named Jim Collins wrote a bestselling business classic *Good to Great*. He wanted to discover why some companies merely survive while others become extraordinary. After studying some of the most successful organizations in the world, he made a surprising discovery. The greatest companies were not typically led by the loudest executives, the biggest personalities, or the most intimidating CEOs. Quite the opposite.

The very best leaders were self-effacing and reserved. Collins called them Level 5 Leaders. They deflected praise toward others. They made much of their team and downplayed their own contributions. Who would have guessed? Jesus was saying that long before Jim Collins. "*Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.*"

The path to greatness is not found by stacking people underneath you. The secret to greatness is making other people great. Spend your life serving people well, and leave the promotion to God.