

EPISTLE: ST. JAMES

4



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PRACTICE QUIZ

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James chapter four discusses a subject that is as relevant for us today as it was in the first century: quarrels and fights in the Church. St. James ended chapter three by telling his readers, “The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (3:18). From where, then, do the wars (long-running conflicts) and fights (recent arguments) come? From our passions, the “desires for pleasures that war in (our) members” (4:1).

Our lust and covetousness leads us to extreme hatred and violence—even, the saint says, “murder” (4:2). Commentators disagree on what “murder” means in this context: Fr. Lawrence Farley believes it refers to rich landowners paying their workers starvation wages; others apply it generally, in that there are people who are driven to murder by their greed and jealousy; still other commentators link the word back to the “deadly poison” spewed forth by our tongues (3:8)—we “murder” the reputations and emotions of people we curse (3:9). I lean towards the last interpretation, because it seems closely tied to what the saint later says in James 4:11-12.

St. James notes that

the people who behave in these ways try to illicitly fulfill their desires: they either leave God entirely out of the equation and do not ask Him to provide for things, or, when they *do* pray, God rejects their requests because they are simply trying to please themselves rather than serve Him and others (4:2-3). Both types of people forget what Lorenzo Scupoli says, “A single raising of your mind to God, and a single humble genuflection to His glory and in His honor has infinitely more value than all the treasures of the world.” Instead of maintaining this attitude, greedy people wind up becoming enemies of God (4:4-5).

What should a Christian do if he or she has become consumed and controlled by greed? St. James responds, “Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (5:8). Such people should respond to the grace given by God, humble themselves and submit to Him, and through this be lifted up by Him (5:6-8). It is useful to remember a teaching attributed to St. Hesychius the Priest, “Whenever we are thus humbled, even if we are tempted by demons and even if we are attacked by those who hate virtue, we have God to deliver us.”

St. James then directs this teaching back to our interactions with others: a person who humbles himself or herself before God must not speak evil of another person (4:11). A person who criticizes another person not only places himself or

herself over the Law, which tells us to love our neighbor (Leviticus 19:18; see also Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31, 33; Luke 10:27), but even usurps the authority and position of Christ, the Lawgiver, Who is the only one “able to save and destroy” (James 4:11-12). St. Cyril of Alexandria even points out that critical people usually criticize others for sins they commit themselves, reminding us of the Holy Apostle Paul’s words in Romans 2:1, “Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.”

People who have such hate and judgmentalism toward others are, in a word, arrogant (4:12, 16). How can we possibly think so highly of ourselves? Haven’t we noticed that we have little control over our lives—we live as if we completely control our lives, but we do not know what will happen tomorrow (4:13-14). We should instead remember that it is ultimately God Who is in control (4:15).

LIFE TIP

St. Anthony the Great explains the spiritual effects of envy: “My children, desire to purify your hearts from envy and from anger with each other, lest death should overcome you, and you will be counted among the murderers. For whosoever hates his brother, kills a soul.”

