

The Letter of James

“CALL TO CONVERSION”

JAMES 3:13--4:10

“Submit, therefore, to God.” (JAS 4:7a)

I. The Section as a Whole

James 3:13–4:10 forms one of the most concentrated calls to conversion in the entire epistle. Though at first glance the section may seem like a string of loosely connected aphorisms, James binds it together through carefully placed word-links, rhetorical questions, and sharp contrasts. The whole functions like a rhetorical sermon: James 3:13–4:6 delivers the indictment; James 4:7–10 summons the community to repentance.

It is a strong prophetic challenge, offering the fullest statement of James’s theological convictions and their moral implications. He exposes the community’s divided loyalties and calls them to return to the singular allegiance demanded by the “wisdom from above.”

II. JAMES 3:13--4:6 - Envy & the Spirit of God

James structures his indictment around a series of rhetorical questions—3:13; 4:1; 4:4; 4:5—each followed by exposition or accusation. These question-and-response units create identity contrasts that define the religious framework for his moral exhortation.

- **James 3:13-18** — James creates a sharp antithesis between “deeds in wisdom’s meekness” and “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.” This is set up as the contrast between a wisdom from below (“earthbound, unspiritual, demonic”) and a “wisdom from above” (Jas 3:15-17). The reader will recognize this “wisdom from above” as the wisdom that comes from God, “the word of truth” and the “implanted word” from James 1:18, 21.
- **James 4:1-4** — James challenges the double-minded—those who want to live within God’s measure but act by another. The opening question in 4:1 stands as an antithesis to 3:17-18, shifting from a paradigm of peace to conflict. After accusing his readers in 4:2–3, James asks another pointed rhetorical question, establishing the contrast

between friendship with God and friendship with the world, a contrast that is irreconcilable.

- **James 4:5-6** — Here James reaches the climax of his indictment: God resists the arrogant but gives grace to the lowly. The movement is from self-assertion to meekness, from grasping to receiving. The incompatibility between envy and the Spirit of God becomes the central theological point.

These contrasts define the religious framework for James' moral exhortation: human behavior flows from the perception of reality shaped by some form of wisdom, whether that is worldly or godly. But the only wisdom that is true is that which measures the reality of God, the giver of all good gifts.

James's description of life under **worldly wisdom** draws on the Greco-Roman philosophical understanding of **envy**. In ancient moral discourse, envy was considered especially loathsome because it implies that one's identity derives from possessing what one does not have. To have more is to be more. Envy thus reveals a perception of reality grounded in scarcity, competition, and self-assertion—precisely the opposite of the divine generosity James has emphasized since 1:17–18.

James's indictment is therefore theological at its core: envy belongs to the world's measure of reality, not God's. It cannot coexist with the Spirit who gives freely, generously, and without reproach.

III. JAMES 4:7--4:10 - Envy & the Spirit of God

James's tone shifts in James 4:7–10 from indictment to invitation—a prophetic call to conversion marked by striking simplicity. After exposing the community's divided loyalties, he now lays out the gestures by which friendship with God is restored. Each imperative is brief, direct, and deeply rooted in Israel's prophetic tradition.

James's summons to repentance is built around three verbs that define the movement back toward God:

- **Submit** — a gesture of yielding one's life to God's measure of reality rather than the world's.
- **Approach** — drawing near to God in trust, with the promise that God draws near in return.
- **Humble** — lowering oneself before God so that God may lift up.

These actions are not complex spiritual techniques; they are simple, decisive movements of the heart. James's pastoral brilliance lies in how he distills repentance into these elemental gestures—each one a step away from double-mindedness and toward wholehearted friendship with God.

James's language in 4:9 (“grieve,” “mourn,” “weep”) echoes the prophets who called Israel to lament its divided allegiance. Yet even here, the act of repentance remains straightforward. These symbols are not meant to create despair but to express the seriousness of turning from the world's measure to God's.

At its core, repentance in James is the purification of the heart from its double-mindedness. The heart must be cleansed of competing allegiances—envy, ambition, worldliness—so that it may be wholly oriented toward the wisdom from above. Repentance is not merely sorrow; it is the reordering of perception and desire so that life aligns with God's generous reality.

James's call is both prophetic and pastoral: return to God, and God will return to you. The path is simple, but the transformation is profound.