

## Prayer

We praise You, Living Lord; for You have a plan for the whole of Your Creation from beginning to end. You have given us the privilege of living in Your world; help us therefore not just to enjoy the benefits of what we have been given, but also to look after our world, to maintain it and manage it; and so find fulfilment in living to Your praise and glory. Thanks be to God, AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Pray in silence, and let the peace of God fill your heart and soul, and give you strength*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray this week** about political parties. Pray today about the way in which the press reports how the country is governed.
- Give praise to God for something He had done to bless you today
- Pray about the threat to world peace of all kinds of racism

## Meditation

There is no life essentially better than yours

For the Lord to use for His will:

There is no time that will prove to be better than now

For deciding to do the Lord's will:

There is no place better than the place where you are

For beginning to walk the Lord's ways:

There are no circumstances better than yours

For the Lord to start a new work:

There is no greater potential in anyone else

For the Lord to prefer them, not you;

There is nothing greater than what you do for your Lord

For His glory will be found through you.

Alleluia!

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## Bible Study - James 4:7-12

<sup>7</sup> Therefore, submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Grieve, mourn and weep. Let your laughter be changed into mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

<sup>11</sup> Do not speak evil of one another, friends. Whoever speaks evil against another or criticises them, speaks evil against the law and judges it; if you judge the law, you don't keep the law but are a critic. <sup>12</sup> There is only one Lawgiver and Judge who is able to save and to destroy. So, then, who are you to criticise your neighbour?

## Review

James continues to give strong words of advice about how to behave in the community of God's people, the church. He encourages a humble attitude to God and others, and gives a whole sequence of words of advice, many of which have become well-known in the life of the church even today. Phrases such as 'resist the devil and he will flee from you' (4:7) are often quoted, but not many people know it is found in James, for example. As we have seen in the previous verses (4:1-6), most of the advice is given against a backdrop of bickering and dissension within the church and it is not far behind the surface of this text. For example,

James does not say 'do not speak evil of one another, friends' for no reason; this was indeed what was happening, moreover James was confronting it. You may say that it was ever thus in the life of the church; but it need not be so if we will learn from God's Word!

James begins with the comment 'submit yourselves to God' (4:7). This must be the right place to start if problems in the Church are to be solved; James does not tell us to submit to the church authorities, but to God. You might understandably say that God exercises His authority through His anointed leaders, but individual Christians are entitled to insist before any leader that their allegiance is to the Lord first and foremost. Leaders have to earn their trust of people through godly behaviour and right leadership, as did David in the Old Testament. Without submission to the Lord by both people and leaders, problems will not be solved.

The next two sayings form a pair; 'resist the devil, and he will flee from you' and 'draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.' The first half of this is often quoted, but it needs its other half as well, for how can anyone resist the devil unless they have drawn near to God so as to resist the enemy in the power and authority of Christ and Christ alone? Drawing near to God will sometimes be enough to send the devil packing by itself! Then, verse 8 calls on God's people to purify themselves because it is impossible for someone to 'draw near to God' if they are 'double minded' or unwilling to 'purify' their hearts. The devil uses every worldly means he can to create havoc, and James' advice is to recognise this truth and deal with it.

James goes even further and demands that God's people recognise together the full extent of sin and evil in their midst (4:9,10). This passage is all about God's people as a community, and when he says 'let your laughter be changed into mourning ...' he is not asking us to put on an act, but instructing us to call on the Holy Spirit to convict us of our sins so that we can come before God in true repentance. Then, the evidence of our sincerity will be truthful and our sorrow genuine. Such repentance, especially when done by a whole community, can release great power. 'Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up.' (4:9).

James then returns to his concern about the way people judge and criticise each other (4:11f.), trying to convince his readers of the magnitude of this sin, and dealt with it by repentance. The truth of these words is evident from James' day to this. His words in verses 11 and 12 illustrate well the critical spirit we can find within the Church even today; when will we ever learn! Underneath the surface of many churches, it is easy to find deeply judgmental attitudes and criticism of others either inside or outside a particular church fellowship. The devil can and will use all this to damage the Church and attempt to prevent God's work from being done. There is no value in blaming people about this, it simply compounds the devil's work, and entrenches people in their own attitudes and their own personal fear of criticism. The clear call of James is for everyone to draw near to Christ (4:8), recognise their sin as a church and individually (4:9,10,11), stand against the devil, and seek forgiveness and cleansing (4:8).

I have seen people follow this advice from James' letter with powerful spiritual consequences, but I also know that few churches would contemplate this way of dealing with their problems, and have also been rebuked for suggesting that a church community follows James' guidance. There are only two things we can do with a scripture like this, ignore it, or apply it. However, the price of ignoring it is to allow the devil to have his way in our midst, but the consequence of applying it is liberation and salvation for God's people, no less.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. How is it that we all become trapped in the critical spirit of our age and times? Try to be specific.
2. How do you feel about the idea that the devil is at work in our midst because of our own judgemental attitudes? How does Christ deal with this?
3. Do you have any experience of God's people collectively confessing their sin and consequently being blessed? If not, why do you think this has not happened?

## Discipleship

### Discipleship issue in this text

- *Keeping close to the Lord*
- *Resisting the devil*
- *Confessing sin and dealing with it collectively*

### Personal comment:

*Yes, I have a clear memory of being rebuked for suggesting that a church repent together of the sins of criticism that were destroying its fellowship; but at least I was criticised publicly! How hard we make it for ourselves when churches become governed by gossip, and people refuse to be specific and open about the problems they have with each other! God help us all speak with care, and be honest, truthful and open.*

#### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Discuss in any house-group you may have whether it is practical for people to make a general confession of sins, and mean it.*
- *Write down any criticisms you have of other members of your church and its leaders. Resolve to speak to them appropriately about what you have written.*

## **Final Prayer**

Dear Lord. You have seen everything that has happened to us, and You are gracious to us still. Receive our confession of wrongdoing, and convince us about how we should change our behaviour for the better. Keep us in Your will, we pray, and keep us close; AMEN

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