

## Getting Into the Spirit of Things

### James 4:5

There are some things that I find difficult to understand. For example, legalese comes to mind, you know, lawyer talk. All of those wherefores and therefore and here to with, and pursuant to. For the most part, it's just mumbo jumbo.

Something else that I have always struggled with are story problems in math. If a plane is flying east from Denver to Miami going 120 mph and a car is traveling from Boston to Philadelphia traveling at 70 mph, how long will it take a 10 lb. block of ice to melt in 85° weather in the Bahamas?

Even the smartest guy on the planet had some things he didn't understand. Solomon wrote **“There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden.” (Proverbs 30:18-19)**

The passage we are considering today is another one of those mysteries. I would suggest first that **James 4:5** is a subjective translation.

#### I. A SUBJECTIVE TRANSLATION

Commentators say this is one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament to translate. One author said **“It should be noted at the outset of the exposition that James 4:5 presents one of the most difficult challenges in the entire New Testament. There is not only a question regarding the most accurate Greek text but also the question of how the Greek text is most accurately interpreted grammatically...After studying multiple resources detailing the difficulties regarding James 4:5, I would suggest that the gracious reader take care not to be too dogmatic in the interpretation of this passage.”**

Even though this is a challenging passage to interpret, that doesn't mean we should ignore it. The debate is over a couple of issues. For example, what “scriptures” is James referring to. Did he have in mind a particular verse from the Old Testament as

some scholars believe pointing to the quotation of **Proverbs 3:34** found in the next verse? Or did he have in mind a general principle taught in the Old Testament regarding the topic he has been discussing about God's jealous love for His people? Some even wonder if James is referring to some unrecorded teaching of his half-brother Jesus.

Some scholars believe that the verse should be broken up into two sentences as Darby translates it. **“Think ye that the Scripture speaks in vain? Does the Spirit which has taken His abode in us desire enviously?”**

Most translate it as a single sentence.

Another issue of debate centers around the word ‘spirit’. Who is James referring to? Some believe spirit refers to the Holy Spirit. Others contend that since James doesn't mention the Holy Spirit any other place in his letter, he must not be referring to the Holy Spirit here, so it must be man's spirit given to him by God at creation. Pastor Chuck Swindoll boils the debate about which spirit James is speaking about into four main views or possibilities.

1. James is referring to man's spirit, given by God at creation. The spirit of man intensely envies.
2. James is referring to God's intense jealousy for us to honor Him with our spirit.
3. James is referring to God's Spirit who is intensely jealous for our faithfulness. This goes back to the previous verse which speaks about being spiritually unfaithful because of our adultery with the world, choosing to love it more than God.
4. James is referring to God being intensely jealous for us to honor Him by the Holy Spirit living in us.

**Is envy to be understood as an unrighteous desire or as a righteous jealousy?**

Your translation may read yearns, lusts or desires. **Is the spirit then, the subject of the verb or the object?** Here are a couple translations that interpret the word to mean the Holy Spirit.

**Amplified “Or do you suppose that the Scripture is speaking to no purpose that says, The Spirit Whom He has caused to dwell in us yearns over us and he yearns for the Spirit [to be welcome] with a jealous love?”**

**NKJV “Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, ‘The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously?’”**

The Phillips, Living Bible, Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest and Darby, among others, also translate the verse as referring to the Holy Spirit.

Those who believe it is the Holy Spirit must answer the question about how the Spirit of God can have a jealousy that is only used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) of a sinful act by man. Nowhere in the Bible is this word used in reference to the jealousy of God or His Spirit.

Translations that interpret the verse as speaking of man’s spirit include the ASB, the ESV, KJV, NIV, NLT, NRSV, and Young’s Literal translation.

While this passage poses some grammatical challenges in understanding the verse, we will do our best to walk away with some application. Whether you consider the spirit with a big S or a little s, there is truth to be learned here about practical Christian living which is the theme of James in his letter.

I am going to take the advice of the author I quoted earlier and not be dogmatic on my view as to whether this is man’s spirit or the Holy Spirit. Despite disagreeing with some very renowned scholars by following other scholars of equal respect, my personal belief falls with those who understand this to be the Holy Spirit rather than man’s spirit. While there is strong argument for either, I think it should be stated that regardless of which it is, James’s thrust is to move us to love God and live for God in our character. If it is man’s spirit James is speaking of, then it’s clear that his intent is show us the need to put away the world as a pseudo lover, which he says in **verse 4** amounts to spiritual adultery. It’s clear from Scripture that this kind of

jealousy is to be removed from those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus. James says this leads to chaos and every evil work. Nothing good ever comes from jealousy, so remove it from your life.

If it is the Holy Spirit James is speaking about, I think it’s clear that his intent is to help us see how the Holy Spirit is working in us to remove this negative characteristic, but then also to show us how intensely God desires our worship to be for Him alone. It is a call to return to faithfulness.

My intent isn’t to argue one way or the other for or against one particular view, but simply to present my understanding and offer some guidance for your walk with God. As I mentioned a moment ago, no one can really be dogmatic here.

If the intention of James is to move his readers toward a greater understanding that the spiritual adultery they are committing toward God because they love the things of the world more than God that is causing Him intense jealousy, then it stands to reason that James is referring to the Holy Spirit who is calling men back to a right relationship with God. He does so through what we learn by what the Scripture teaches us.

## II. THE SCRIPTURE TEACHES US

Our passage begins with a rhetorical question. **“Or do you think Scripture says without reason?”** It’s a continuation of the question posed in **verse 4**. Where the NIV says “without reason”, the KJV uses the word “vain”. The Amplified asks if the Scriptures have “no purpose”. Essentially, James is asking if the Scriptures are without value. **Does it have a point? Can it teach us anything?** We would say yes, it does have value.

It seems plausible that from the context of the passage that James is pointing to **verse 6**, which is from **Proverbs 3:34**, but I’m not going to be dogmatic. Peter also refers to it in **I Peter 5:5**. **Isn’t it pride that makes us jealous and envious? Isn’t it pride that causes us to love other things more than God? Isn’t it pride that causes a person to worship himself instead of God?**

We are going to look at **verse 6** next week, so for today I want to zoom way out and look at it from the 30,000-foot view and answer the question: **What do we learn from Scripture?**

### A. What Scripture Teaches Us Is Personal – Psalm 119:105

AAA auto insurance has a special feature for its members. Their Triptik planner can customize your trip to take you to various locations of your choosing along your route that you may want to see as you travel to your destination.

As in any trip, there is a beginning point of the journey, it's the place where you start. The beginning point for the believer is salvation, the moment you realize you are a sinner in need of a Savior, and put your faith or trust in Jesus Christ who paid the debt we owe for sin. **II Peter 3:9** says God isn't willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. Scripture is personal in that it teaches that every person is a sinner in need of a Savior, without which we will be forever condemned to a Christless eternity.

The Bible then tells us about the end destination God has in mind for every person. When we believe in Christ for salvation, we will not perish but have everlasting life and some day He will return for us to take us with Him to be where He is forever.

In between the starting and ending points of the journey, there is a customized road map that is personal for every believer. Ultimately each of us has the same goal, which is to develop Christ like character along the way, but that journey is different for every one of us. We read in **Psalm 119:105** that God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Each of us has a personal travel plan to arrive at godliness in our character. How I arrive at godliness will be different than how you get there, because we have different things to work on along the way. God's Word reveals the path we are to take to arrive at godliness. I may take a detour due to some sin that requires a course correction because I deviated from the path.

Several years ago, we took a trip though Ohio. One of our side trips was a visit to the Air Force Museum in Dayton. We were trying to follow the signs but got off an exit too early. As we turned onto a side street to get back on the expressway, we ran over a sharp piece of metal that punctured our tire. We had to wait for a tow truck, then sit for a couple hours at Discount Tire before we could get back on the right road and continue our journey.

The personal nature of Scripture is that it knows when we take a wrong turn and get off the right road. But it doesn't leave us stranded. It shows us how to get back on the right road. In **II Timothy 3:16** the Word of God is profitable for correction.

Sometimes we are on the right road, but we are taking a little longer getting there. Scripture speaks of God like a shepherd leading His sheep. The shepherd is never impatient or drives his sheep, otherwise they will get weary and maybe choose to lag behind. The shepherd is patient and journeys with His sheep at their pace. He never pushes us, but does encourage us along the way to maturity.

**How much time are you spending in Scripture to discover the personal road map God has given you along your journey of faith as you near your final destination? Have you taken some unscheduled detours and gotten off the right road?**

What Scripture teaches us is personal.  
What Scripture teaches us is powerful.

### B. What Scripture Teaches Us Is Powerful – Hebrews 4:12

Scripture penetrates the heart, mind, and soul reaching into the inner most part of the person to judge thoughts and motives and attitudes. It can discern what is spiritual in man and what is fleshly or worldly and like a skillful surgeon, it can remove what shouldn't be there. **Walvoord and Zuch write that "It takes a supernatural discerning agent such as the Word of God to sort these out and to expose what is of the flesh."**

We might think our motive is spiritual; we might

think our actions are spiritual, but the Word of God discerns and differentiates between the two and reveals them to us because His Word is powerful.

**1. It has the power to save you – Romans 1:16  
Romans 10:17**

**2. It has the power to sanctify you – John 17:17**  
In other words, it has the power to make you holy, to set you apart, to show you how you should live the Christian life in godliness: what to do and not do

**3. It has the power to keep you from sinning –  
Psalm 119:9, 11**

Each month in the bulletin we recommend a Scripture passage to memorize. Or memorize your own passages. The Holy Spirit will guide you to Scripture that will help you in your faith journey. You're never too young or too old to memorize.

I think it was Warren Wiersbe or D. L. Moody who used to say "God's Word will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from God's Word."

What Scripture teaches us is powerful.  
What Scripture teaches us is profitable.

**C. What Scripture Teaches Is Profitable –  
II Timothy 3:16-17**

In other words, all of Scripture has value. The old adage is true that those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it is true.

The books of the law teach about God and His desire to have a personal relationship with man. It teaches about sin and the consequences of sin and affirms God's law, but it also teaches about God's redemptive plan to bring us back into a right relationship with Him.

The books of history teach us about the consequences of what happens when we disobey God, but also what happens when we repent.

The books of poetry are a beautiful reminder of how personal God is and provides us with instruction on how to make wise choices, that we can trust God, and that He is our refuge and redeemer, an ever-

present help in time of trouble, One who journeys with us every step of the way.

We learn from the books of prophecy that God will judge sin, but He is also forgiving because He loves us with an everlasting love pointing people back to God. Some prophecy pointed to the coming Messiah, our hope of salvation. Some reveal events that are yet to unfold.

All of Scripture is profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training for godly living, that we might mature and be equipped for what God has planned for us.

**Are you finding value in God's Word?**

What Scripture teaches us is profitable.  
What Scripture teaches us is prophetic.

**D. What Scripture Teaches Is Prophetic –  
II Peter 1:20-21**

The Old Testament is clear that if someone claimed he had a word from God and it didn't come true, that person was a false prophet. When God's prophets spoke, what they said happened 100% of the time because God said it. There are some things yet to happen like Daniel's prophecies, but they are true as if they have already happened because God spoke them to His prophets. As Peter said, their words of prophecy weren't something they thought of on their own. They were moved along by the Holy Spirit with words that came from God.

When I think about prophecy that is yet to be fulfilled, I think of Jesus's words that as believers we are to watch, be ready, be vigilant, and be prepared. So in the sense that God's Word teaches prophetically, it also teaches us what to do and how to live while we wait for Christ to return.

**Are you looking for His return?**

**Are you preparing for His return?**

What Scripture teaches us is prophetic.  
What Scripture teaches us is purposeful.

**E. What Scripture Teaches Is Purposeful –  
Isaiah 55:10-11**

Isaiah compares what happens when it rains and snows and what happens with the Word of God. Both have a purpose with results. The rain and snow don't return but instead accomplish what it is supposed to do by watering the earth so that when seed is planted it can reap a harvest that will produce food for people to eat.

In the same way, the word that comes from God has an intended purpose. When He speaks, He has in mind an end result and it will accomplish what He pleases from it, achieving its goal.

**Psalm 37:12-13** says that the wicked plot against the righteous, but that God laughs at their plans because He knows their day is coming.

**Numbers 23:19** reminds us that God is not like a man. He will do what He says. When God speaks His Word, it will bring forth spiritual life accomplishing what He intended in that person.

**Are you allowing God's Word to have its intended purpose in you?**

What Scripture teaches us is purposeful.

What Scripture teaches us is pleasant.

**F. What Scripture Teaches Is Pleasant –  
Jeremiah 15:16  
Psalm 1:2**

I have read a lot of things in my life.

I've read things that have made me mad.

I've read things that have made me sad.

I've read things that have made me discouraged, depressed, and disheartened.

If I read God's Word, through the lens of God's Spirit teaching me, Jeremiah says it brings joy and rejoicing to my heart. David said that the person who lives by God's Word finds it a delight. According to the dictionary, the word delight literally means to ensnare. I take that to mean to be captivated, to find great joy or pleasure.

When Robyn and I first started corresponding by email before we officially started dating, I looked forward to every note. I read them and reread them and then read them again. They ensnared me, they

captivated me, they brought me joy. In **Acts 17:11** the Bereans received the Word from Paul with a ready mind and then searched the Scriptures daily.

**When was the last time you were so captivated by God's Word that it brought joy to your heart and caused you to rejoice?**

What Scripture teaches us is pleasant.

Whether or not you believe **James 4:5** points to a specific passage or to a general principle isn't necessarily important. The point to the rhetorical question is that yes, there is value in Scripture because Scripture teaches us a lot of things. **Are we allowing its power to change us into character that reflects its author?**

Let me address one more thought from the verse. It has to do with the Spirit. Not only do we see that Scripture teaches us, we also see from Scripture that the Spirit transforms us.

### III. THE SPIRIT TRANSFORMS US

I said at the onset that this was a difficult passage to interpret. If you take the verse to mean the spirit referred to here is the spirit God gave man at his creation when He breathed into him the breath of life, which after the fall had a desire to intensely envy that is sinful, as we see in the case of Cain toward his brother Abel, then the passage is still a rebuke on man's spiritual infidelity that desires something other than or more than God.

On the other hand, if you believe, as I do, that the spirit referred to here is the Holy Spirit, it is a call to consider where our allegiance lies. That Spirit is calling us to a committed devotion to love God and forsake everything else that would otherwise captivate our heart. If at the core of our unredeemed nature we are all about worshipping things, then after salvation, that pull to worship those things other than God still has tremendous power and appeal to drag our hearts from Him. In holy jealousy, the Holy Spirit wants to turn our wayward, cheating, spiritually adulterous hearts back to the One who redeemed us through His grace and has loved us with an everlasting and unquenchable love.

If James is referring to the Holy Spirit, then there is an intense jealousy on His part as the one who indwells us to turn our heart back to worshipping God alone, to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and not allow anything else to take the place of what rightly belongs to God. The Holy Spirit would be like the spouse who is intensely jealous when the other spouse is courted by someone else or who flirts with others.

**Is God intensely jealous for us to honor him with our spirit?** Yes, God is jealous when our spirit is wooed by other things that desire to have the affection that He deserves from us. His Spirit will convict us.

Robyn would not like it at all if I went around singing “I only have eyes for you and you and you and you.” God is jealous when our eyes are lured by other things and His Spirit works to draw our hearts back to Him.

**Does God’s Spirit have an intense jealousy for our faithfulness?** Yes.

**Does God desire us to honor Him by the Holy Spirit who lives in us?** Yes. God created us with a spirit, and He desires that our spirit worship Him, but it is only through the Holy Spirit that we can. If there is spiritual infidelity in us, the solution is yielding to the power of God’s Spirit in us. His Spirit works to protect our spirit from loving something else more.

**So how does His Spirit transform us?**

I can think of three ways.

#### **A. He Regenerates Us – Titus 3:5**

It’s also called rebirth or being born again. Before salvation, we were spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins. This regeneration is a spiritual, holy, and heavenly birth that makes us alive spiritually. When we trust Christ as Savior, the Holy Spirit makes us spiritually alive. At salvation, He makes a complete transformation making us into a new creation from the inside out (**II Corinthians 5:17**). It’s important to note that this transformation is not from the outside in. Regeneration doesn’t take place after we have cleaned up our act. Regeneration is something

only the Holy Spirit can do and takes place on the inside. Only when the inside is made new can we begin to do something on the outside. The inside can never become regenerated if it was up to us trying to clean up the outside first.

Regeneration is a radical change that makes us think and do things differently because we now have the Spirit of God living in us. That’s the second transformation that happens. He resides in us.

#### **B. He Resides In Us**

**Galatians 4:6** “Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, ‘Abba, Father.’”

**Romans 8:9** “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”

If you haven’t experienced the rebirth that comes only through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, then you don’t have the Spirit living in you and if you don’t have the Spirit in you, you will not understand the things of God (**I Corinthians 2:10-14**). When we have the Spirit residing in us then He can begin His work of reshaping us.

#### **C. He Reshapes Us – Philippians 1:6**

As we yield to the work of the Holy Spirit in us, He takes what we are in position (holy) and begins to transform what we are in practice so that the habits of the old nature are removed and replaced with the character of Christ by developing His fruit in us (**Galatians 5:22-23**). He reshapes us into the character of Christ. As we have been learning through our study of James, it is the Holy Spirit who transforms our walk, our words, and our witness.

Scripture continually teaches us. **Are we continually learning from it?**

The Holy Spirit wants to transform us. **Are we letting Him do His work to make us more like Christ?** It’s His way of helping us love God more each day so that we remain a faithful bride obeying Him, not an adulterous spouse lured away by sin.