


## JAMES 4:4

### THE HIGH COST FRIENDSHIP WITH THE WORLD

“You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”<sup>1</sup>

uch! James is not nice! He calls fellow Christians harsh names and he speaks far too plainly for respectable church people! Few of us would remain for long in a church where the Pastor called us “adulterous people.” Even if we were somewhat focused on our own wants and disloyal to the One we call “Lord,” we wouldn’t stand for such name-calling. Pastors are supposed to be “nice.” It says so in the Bible—doesn’t it?

Perhaps that is why we seldom witness the vigorous Christianity of the apostolic era. When reading this letter, we need to remember that James was writing to Christians who were even at that early date drifting from their secure position as followers of the Risen Lord of Glory. What was written to them has application to us if we are drifting and focused on our own wants.

We have grown accustomed to ease and comfort; we do not like it when we are told that we are wrong. We are trained to soothe the errant rather than correct them. This attitude is endemic throughout the whole of modern society; and the churches of our Lord are likewise infected with a strange virus that lulls us into complacency. Yet, James stands astride our path as we attempt to rush headlong down the road leading to irrelevance and ultimate destruction.

**JAMES IS ADDRESSING CHRISTIANS** — “You adulterous people!” The first point to establish in your mind is that James is writing to Christians. His instruction has little relevance to those in the world, though they would undoubtedly benefit were they to heed his words. James is not writing those who are identified with this dying world. For that reason, distressed by Christians that have grown casual concerning righteousness, he addresses his readers as adulterous people.

Was James writing unsaved people, he could not address them as adulterous; it is impossible for an unmarried person to be adulterous. Unmarried people may be lascivious, lewd, salacious, ribald, or unchaste—and if not personally engaged in such activity, the general populace has become tolerant of such activity. In support of this contention one need but note the absence of general outrage at such degrading shows on popular television as “Mad Men” and “Desperate Housewives.” Nevertheless, since there is no permanent commitment, unmarried people cannot be adulterous—they are not breaking a vow of monogamous chastity. However, James is not writing about a loss of cultural mores; he is writing about the danger among the churches when Christians are co-opted by the world about them.

The redeemed of God are identified as Christ’s Bride [cf. **REVELATION 19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17**]. Writing the Corinthians, Paul would inform them, “I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ” [**2 CORINTHIANS 11:2**]. Perhaps no better example of how Christ the Lord views His congregation is provided than that which is given in Paul’s encyclical we know as the Letter to the Ephesians.

“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version** © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” [EPHESIANS 5:22-32].

Jesus frequently employed the imagery of a wedding to illustrate and explain the concept of the Kingdom of Heaven. For instance, on one occasion the Master told a story of a wedding feast, and He used the wedding feast as a setting to explain the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son, and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.’ But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find.’ And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good. So the wedding hall was filled with guests.

“But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen” [MATTHEW 22:2-14].

Similarly, in the parable of the ten virgins, five of whom were foolish and five of whom were wise, the focus is again the Kingdom of Heaven [see MATTHEW 25:1-13]. Jesus uses the theme of a wedding when urging His disciples to maintain readiness for His return. He said, “Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants! But know this, that if the master of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have left his house to be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” [LUKE 12:35-40].

This message is not intended as a discourse on weddings, however. The message is focused on God’s address to His people through His servant James; and when the Living God confronts His people as adulterous, each of us should take note. Something in the life of those whom James addressed had earned God’s disapproval; and if we seek to continue walking with God, enjoying His favour, we will do well to discover and avoid all that displeases Him. If we review what has preceded the text, we will discover what it was that brought James to the point of confronting these Christians, calling them “adulterous people.”

**JAMES IS ADDRESSING WORLDLY CHRISTIANS** — “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” The churches to which James wrote were in danger of becoming enemies of God, if they were not already in that perilous situation. In some way, the Christians in these churches were identified as forming friendships with the world. What does friendship with the world look like? How does a church that has grown friendly with the world act? To answer this question as James would have framed it, one need but review what he has written to this point.

Reviewing what James has written we see that he has identified specific attitudes and actions that reveal Christians who are markedly infatuated with the world. James contends that the churches he writing had been infiltrated by the world. A church that stands opposed to the world will be respected by the world, though the world will not often like what that church stands for. However, a church that has conceded the world’s agenda will be tolerated by the world, though it cannot be respected by the world.

The changes among the Christians to whom James wrote were no doubt gradual—so subtle and measured that even those changing were not aware of the transformation. Nevertheless, the changes were significant. At first, the Christians were strong in their faith, standing firm against evil and willing to endure anything for the cause of Christ. Then, as opposition and even persecution continued, the erosion of their courage became palpable. At last the day came when they could make excuses for their failure to stand strong, justifying their concessions and even exhibiting their compromise as wisdom.

So, James reminded his readers that they must seek God’s wisdom [**JAMES 1:5-8**] and walk in humility before the Lord [**JAMES 1:9-11**]. He encouraged them to stand steady, supporting one another in the pressures of life [**JAMES 1:12-18**]. They would need one another if they were to remain faithful; and they would need to lean heavily on the Word of God [**JAMES 1:19-25**]. There had been quite enough of people knowing about the Word, though there was need for people willing to do the Word. Religion was not merely knowing the rules; it was doing what honoured God as one showed compassion and kept himself or herself pure in the midst of a fallen world [**JAMES 1:26, 27**].

When the church was young, the members of the Body considered one another as family. They had stood together when persecuted, and they had shared hardship even as they encouraged one another. They were brothers and sisters having one Father, God the Almighty. At first, they accepted one another with respect and treated one another with dignity, regardless of social standing or wealth. With time, they became aware of distinctions in class and in wealth and in position within the broader social community. The transformation may not have taken as long as you might suppose, for these churches were the first generation of the movement that came to be known as Christianity. In fact, the change can take place within a matter of months.

The churches to which James was writing were becoming discriminatory in their acceptance of one another. They sought standing in the eyes of the world, which was a subtle way of seeking the world’s approval. The rich and the notable were solicited to attend their services, whereas the poor and undistinguished were shunned. The churches wanted to be respectable, and concluded that the shortest way to being respectable in the eyes of the world was to have “quality” people in membership. Some among the churches began to promote themselves as more mature than others, though they were not necessarily grounded in biblical truth. These were political creatures and they gained ascendancy within the congregation. Decision-making became a political process rather than a search for truth.

In light of this transformation, James patiently taught the saints again that they must not discriminate against one another [JAMES 2:1-13]. He urged them to evaluate one another on the expression of faith demonstrated through courage, responsibility and compassion [JAMES 2:14-26]. Whereas the church had once been composed of fishermen and farmers, tax collectors and publicans, it now sought businessmen and barristers—people of wealth and status in the community. The church was being populated with social climbers and effete snobs; the people were soon marked with attitudes that could only be described as haughty. The people needed to be confronted with what they should be, returning again to the teachings of the Word of God.

Some among the churches saw the role of teacher as a way to promote personal agendas. Though ignorant of the Word of God, they promoted “sensible” solutions to complex problems that would appeal, they said, to the inhabitants of the world. Perhaps their ideas worked—for a while. Eventually, however, the seed that was planted was shown to be corrupt as the fruit poisoned and contaminated the life of the Body. James reminded his readers of the power of the tongue for evil, reminding them that speech could only be controlled as it was submitted to the reign of the Master and to His Word [JAMES 3:1-12].

Ultimately, reaching for the elusive fruit of acceptance by mavens and doyens of the world, the churches had begun routinely to embrace earthly wisdom. They became democracies, rather than theocracies. They decided that fifty percent plus one determined truth, rather than receiving the will of God revealed through His Word. Scrambling to be acceptable in the eyes of the world, they embraced the wisdom of the world even as they rejected the wisdom from above. And James was compelled to remind them to seek the wisdom from above [JAMES 3:13-18].

The ultimate mark of these worldly Christians was quarrelling and fighting as their passions raged out of control. They were always pursuing respectability in the eyes of the world; and despite their vigorous efforts, they were never satisfied. At last, even their prayer life had degenerated into mere form. They “said” prayers, but they did not pray. Again, James pointed out the futility of their efforts, reminding them that they did not have because they did not ask, and when they did ask, they erred because they sought only their own comfort [JAMES 4:1-3].

In James’ view, these Christians had become worldly. Their churches were organisations, and not organic entities. The right people could “join” the church, but God no longer added to the church. When a congregation reaches such a condition, the Spirit of God could be removed from the world, and the church would still function. The meetings would be held with icy regularity—prayers would be said, Scripture would be read, sermons would be delivered, but no one would be saved and no feelings would be hurt. Votes would be taken on “important” issues and decisions would be made, but the will of God would still be unknown.

The issue is sufficiently important that I want to take time to stress what friendship with the world looks like. Though I have quickly reviewed what James had already written, take a moment to fix in your mind what friendship with the world looks like. The issue is important precisely because we are susceptible to slipping into the identical condition that had infected the churches to which James drafted his letter.

Friendship with the world means that a Christian is more concerned with relieving her own immediate discomfort than she is with standing firm in the truth. Friendship with the world means that the congregation is willing to do whatever is required to make people like them. Friendship with the world means that a child of God is driven more by personal ambition than by determination to be righteous. Friendship with the world means that a Christian is ruled by his or her personal desires rather than by the will of God. Friendship with the world means that Christians have reduced the Faith to ritual rather than obedience.

Friendship with the world means that a church, and consequently the individual Christians that make up that religious community, have begun to discriminate; they no longer accept one another as brothers and sisters, instead ranking one another on arbitrary scales. Friendship with the world means that some within a church hold an exalted opinion about themselves—their importance to the church or in the eyes of God—or they hold an exalted opinion about others whom they treat as though part of an ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Friendship with the world means that Christians have begun to substitute ritual for relationship—they are ever so precise in performing the rites of the church, but they have forgotten what intimacy with God meant. They go to church, instead of being the church. Christians who form friendships with the world say prayers rather than praying. They slavishly read chapters and verses without hearing the voice of God through His Word. They claim allegiance to Christ, but they have no relationship to Him or His people. Friendship with the world means that Christians have begun treating the church as an organisation—they joined it, and they can quit it. For these who are friendly with the world, the church is used for their own purposes rather than being treated with the respect due the Living Body of Christ the Lord.

Friendship with the world means that Christians are using the tongue as a weapon rather than a tool for building one another in love. Friendship with the world means that a Christian, with the concurrence of his or her church, defends destructive speech as his right. That church which has entered into friendship with the world no longer seeks to speak the truth, choosing instead to say what is convenient. Personal comfort is chosen rather than integrity.

All these evidences of friendship with the world are drawn from applying instructions James has provided earlier. However, it seems that above all else, friendship with the world results whenever a Christian, or whenever a church, ceases to appropriate the wisdom from above. What results is the exaltation of personal desire with concomitant estrangement from God. They become capable of creating disorder and every vile practise [JAMES 3:13-16].

In the verses immediately preceding the text, James exposes those who have entered into friendship with the world as people ruled by their passions. The longing for personal pleasure, comfort or ease becomes the driving force motivating decision-making and even speech. The desire for personal gratification is so strong in Christians who are friends with the world that even their prayer life is affected. Their search for pleasure is so intense that they fail to pray, and when they do pray, they attempt to coerce God to do their will. In short, Christians that form friendships with the world have become indistinguishable from the world in which they live.

It is a dangerous thing to confront Christians with their worldliness. I recall one occasion when I confronted a church. I pointed out that they were ever so proud of their “righteousness.” However, the “righteousness” of which they boasted was not Christ’s imputed righteousness. They were worldly, and I pointed out that though they were icily precise in the conduct of their religion, they were nevertheless worldly.

I pointed to several scriptures that demonstrate that worldliness results from attitudes rather than from actions. People that are proud of what they don’t do often fail to realise that how they view the world reveals a mindset identified as belonging to the world. Thus, worldly people think in a worldly manner.

The churches of Galatia must have been uncomfortable when the Apostle confronted them, listing the “works of the flesh.” “You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Later, Paul would make it plain to them that faith in Christ anticipates a transformation. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” [GALATIANS 5:13-21, 24].

Writing Titus, Paul reminded him that “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” [TITUS 2:11-14].

In order to ensure that no one would miss what he was saying, Paul provided positive instruction. Christians are to be submissive to rulers and authorities, obedient, ready for every good work, speaking evil of no one. They are to avoid quarrelling, being gentle and showing perfect courtesy toward all people [TITUS 3:1, 2]. Then, in words that iterate what James had previously written, Paul said, “We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another” [TITUS 3:3].

Living in the flesh, being worldly, means that our sinful passions are at work in our lives bearing fruit that leads to death [see ROMANS 7:5, 6]—death to relationships, death to the work of God, and ultimately, death to our own person. Paul will remind Roman Christians that “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” [ROMANS 8:6-8].

Spiritual people consider what pleases God; worldly people think of their own desires. Tragically, worldly Christians often imagine that they are quite mature, justifying their selfish actions because they have gratified their own interests. Thus, Paul sadly informed the Corinthians that he could not speak to them as spiritual people. “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not being merely human” [1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-4]?

**WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN ENEMY OF GOD** — “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” Those are indeed chilling words. To oppose God is to imagine that puny man can defeat Almighty God. However, the contest is not simply uneven! The outcome is decided before the bout even begins. As the black preachers of years past would trumpet out the warning, “Little man, your arms are too short to box with God.”

It is vital to keep in mind that James is writing to Christians who have cultivated a friendship with the world. We know that those who have never believed in Christ the Lord are already under divine condemnation. John writes, “Whoever believes in [Jesus] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the Name of the Only Son of God” [JOHN 3:18]. In few short paragraphs John will iterate this truth when he writes, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” [JOHN 3:36].

Therefore, when God speaks of a Christian who positions himself as an enemy of God, He is not speaking of a loss of salvation, but he is saying that the child of God has placed himself in a position of opposition to the will of God—he is standing on enemy territory. From the text, it is obvious that the world-friendly Christian will continue to be ruled by his passions rule, and he will be increasingly miserable. It means that the worldly Christian will continue to fail in her prayer life because she either relegates prayer to an afterthought or she is so focused on what she wants that she asks only to waste God’s grace on her own fallen desires.

Let me remind you of a truth that is easily forgotten. Jesus promised His disciples, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in Me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in My Name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My Name, I will do it” [JOHN 14:12-14]. When we are focused on bringing glory to the Father through the Son, God is pledged on His sacred honour to give us what we ask. There is no promise to give us what we want so we can consume His grace on our own fallen desires.

Shortly after He spoke the words just cited, Jesus iterated that promise when He said, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in My Name, He may give it to you” [JOHN 15:16]. Again, we are chosen by Christ to bear fruit in order to enjoy intimacy with the Father, receiving whatever we ask so that we will continue to be fruitful in His service.

When a Christian becomes an enemy of God, he or she loses intimacy with God. The Christian ceases praying and when he attempts to pray he asks amiss. Similarly, in a worldly church the leaders are focused on gratifying their own passions, and quarrels and fights become the order of the day within the congregation—God ceases participating in the services. Just as the Glory of the Lord departed Jerusalem when Israel ceased serving Him in the days of Ezekiel [EZEKIEL 10:1 ff.], so the God’s Glory leaves the church that becomes worldly. Intimacy with God dims to become a distant memory. Though people may join the organisation, the Spirit of God ceases bringing people to life and appointing them to the congregation. Saints who long for the presence of the Lord drift away to find another community where God is at work. The fire dies and the Spirit of God ceases to work and the grind of church becomes a monotonous tedium.

But it need not be thus. James will remind his readers that God “yearns jealously over the spirit that He has made to dwell in us” [JAMES 4:5]. God longs for His people to know Him and to enjoy Him. This is not a desire deferred or delayed by God; rather, He seeks His people to come into His presence now and to discover the joy of walking with Him. If we are weary, He gives rest; we need but ask. If we are weak, He gives strength; we need but ask. If we are wounded, He heals and makes us whole; we need but ask. If we are grieved, He promises joy; we need but ask. Moreover, we have already received the promise that if we lack wisdom we need but ask and the Father will give generously [JAMES 1:5, 6]. Shortly, James will provide the divine promise that God gives more grace [JAMES 4:6]. All that is required for you and for me to enjoy the presence of God is to receive what He freely offers.

Perhaps you are a Christian who is even now forming an illicit friendship with the world. The cost is too high for you to continue pursuing that course. You are jettisoning intimacy with the Lord, immediate access to His throne, power in your service to Him and in His cause, and the knowledge of pleasing Him. Return to the Lord. Ask Him to renew your love and to refresh your spirit. Set aside time to enjoy the Lord, simply to enjoy being in His presence and to enjoy learning from Him. Rather than being religious, begin again to bask in the love of the Father. The Word of God promises that if we draw near to God He will draw near to us [JAMES 4:8].

Perhaps you share the service and as you listened to the message you realise that you are not one of God's redeemed people. You would be forced to describe yourself as "having no hope and without God in the world" [EPHESIANS 2:12]. You cannot be religious enough to impress God to accept you. You cannot do enough good deeds to compel God to overlook your sin. There is a message of hope for you, however.

All of us were once dead in trespasses and sins [EPHESIANS 2:1]; we were under sentence of eternal death, just as you are now. However, God sent His Son that He might provide a perfect sacrifice because of the sin of all mankind. Jesus lived a perfect life, and at the right time He offered His life as an infinite sacrifice because of your sin. The Word of God informs us that "for our sake [God] made Him (Christ Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" [2 CORINTHIANS 5:21].

The Good News concerning the death of Christ the Lord is that He did not stay dead. Though He was buried, on the third day He broke the chains of death and came out of the tomb. He was raised for justification for all who believe Him. Therefore, the God calls us, promising, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." That promise continues by citing one of the prophets: "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved" [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

This is the promise of God. If you believe this message of life in the Risen, Living Son of God, God will give you forgiveness of sin, adopt you into His family, give you a place in His Kingdom, and permit you to know Him, to call on Him with the promise that He will hear, to receive all the goodness that He longs to grant to all who know Him. Will you accept this Saviour? Will you receive the gift of life? Our prayer is that you will receive the life that is promised in the Son of God. Do it now. Amen.