

# Wiseguy

Studies in the Book of James

Text

James 4:1-12

Topic

James describes believers in the church as though they were prodigals living at home

Title

*"Practically Prodigal in Every Way"*

## Introduction

The director of *The Purge* admitted he was inspired by an episode of *Stark Trek - The Original Series*.

Stay calm: I haven't seen, nor do I plan to see, *The Purge*, or it's two sequels. (After all, I'm a Christian... Just kidding... Maybe).

The movie describes an America with a totalitarian government and a police state. The 28th Amendment to the US Constitution is ratified, establishing a 12-hour event known as "The Purge" which takes place from 7:00pm the evening of March 21 to 7:00am the morning of March 22. During that time, all crime - including murder - becomes legal.

The movie tagline is, "Survive the night."

It sounded like something I'd seen before; so I looked it up.

In a print interview, director James DeMonaco was inspired, he said, by the *Star Trek* episode, *Return of the Archons*.

Captain Kirk and company beam down to a planet whose populace is tightly controlled by a computer called Landru. At 6pm each day, everybody goes mad, committing all manner of heinous crimes for a period of sixty minutes, called the Red Hour.

I thought James was describing the Red Hour when I read through the verses we are studying and saw these words: "fights," "war," "lust," "murder," and "covet."

While those words would accurately describe *The Purge* or *Return of the Archons*, James was describing goings on in the churches.

Read the verses and you'll see that the believers James was writing to - at least a significant number of them - possessed a worldly spirit while they remained in the church.

James drops a clue as to what he may have been thinking about with regard to their worldliness. In verse three, he says, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may **spend** it on your pleasures."

That word *spend* is used Luke 15:14 to describe the activities of the prodigal son. You know the story: He demanded his inheritance early, so he could go out into the world and *spend* it on riotous living.

I think James was suggesting that the worldly believers involved in "fights," "wars," "lusting," "murdering," and "coveting," **were prodigals who had never left home**. They were stay-at-home, in the church, prodigals, but living as if they were out in the world.

You don't want to be a stay-at-home prodigal; you want to be a stay-the-course progeny.

We'll work through the verses by asking two questions: #1 Are You A Stay-at-Home Prodigal? Or #2 Are You A Stay-the-Course Progeny?

## #1 Are You A Stay-at-Home Prodigal?

(v1-6)

We tend to romanticize the first century church. As amazing as it was, built on the foundation of Jesus Christ by the apostles and prophets in such a way that it shatters the Gates of Hell, it was riddled with problems.

Most of the letters written to the individual churches were corrective of various serious issues.

The believers in Corinth were dividing over who to follow as the 'best' teacher; they were suing one another in open court; they were tolerating, in their midst, gross sexual sin; they were getting drunk at the communion table.

In his letter to the Galatian churches, Paul asks, "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?" (3:1).

- There was strife in Philippi.
- In Colossae the believers were being affected by false teachings.
- In Thessalonica there were some who had quit working and were mooching off of others.

Jesus wrote letters to seven churches in the Revelation. The only one to escape correction was Smyrna, the suffering church.

The situation in Laodicea was so severe it prompted Jesus to say, "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth" (3:16).

I don't mean to in any way denigrate the church. We are the beloved bride of Jesus Christ. He is daily cleansing us, looking forward to the day He will present us perfect in Heaven to His Father.

In the mean time, sadly, believers can sometimes be described as follows.

[Jas 4:1 Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?](#)

"Wars" describe ongoing conflicts, and "fights" are the particular skirmishes.

This doesn't mean they had come to blows - although that does happen. I ran across this 2016 article:

A service at Deliverance Church in Rongo, western Kenya, turned chaotic when pastors exchanged blows over leadership, prompting worshipers to run for safety.

The pastors hurled stones and chairs at each other, injuring several members, in the incident on Sunday.

You don't need to come to blows to fight a war in church. There are more subtle, and definitely more sinister, ways of doing so.

James wants us to acknowledge that, wherever there *are* wars and fights, the root cause is the war within each of us as our unredeemed flesh seeks its own satisfaction.

If I'm upset with a brother or sister, and try to take them down by drafting others to come over to me and be in my army and be against them... I'm in sin. Somebody should point it out, and I should repent, before things escalate.

Jas 4:2 You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.

James backtracks, mentioning three things, then returning to "fight[s] and war[s]."

"Lust" is certainly seen in the church at Corinth where they were tolerating, proudly, the membership of a couple in which the man was having sex with his father's wife.

Anytime you are in the church, but committing sexual sin, you're a stay-at-home prodigal.

"Lust" isn't limited to sexual sin. You can "lust" after possessions, or position, or power. The apostle John had to deal with a guy named Diotrefes whom he said "wouldn't receive us" because "he loved to have... the preeminence" (Third John 1:9).

"Murder" is what Jesus said we do if we harbor anger and hatred in our hearts.

It's hard to not "covet" when we are around others in the church. Whether its some possession of theirs, or some relationship they have which we do not, our tendency is to want what others have.

James points out that these characteristics "cannot obtain."  
These characteristics, when pursued, *can* help you attain pleasure - at least, for a season.

What they "cannot obtain" is satisfaction. You will always need to lust, murder, and covet more if you yield to the flesh. You will always be at war with others, fighting.

You can never give the flesh enough. It's like the description Captain Barbosa gave of the cursed state of he and his *Black Pearl* crew,

And there be the chest... and inside, be the gold. We took them all! Spent 'em, traded 'em and fritted 'em away, for drink and food and pleasurable company. But the more we gave them away, the more we came to realize. The drink would not satisfy, food turned to ash in our mouths, nor all the company in the world would harm or slake our lust. We are cursed men... Compelled by greed, we were. But now, we are consumed by it.

James says, "Yet you do not have because you do not ask." Instead of yielding to the flesh, we ought to seek the things that are spiritual, that promote spiritual health and growth.

Jas 4:3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Those who might object, claiming to be people who prayed, were praying wrongly. They were praying for the things their flesh desired, instead of what their spirit required.

Do you realize that entire congregations, and lots of believers in other congregations, still follow the health and wealth heresy?

The one that grounds your prayer life solidly on earth, and on earthly things, like cars and houses and other material things? The teaching that God wants you to be in total health, and rich?

This is a great verse to refute them.

Jas 4:4 Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

We tend to think of physical adultery, whereas a Messianic Jew would immediately receive this as a rebuke of their spiritual adultery.

In the Old Testament, God the Father depicts Himself as a Husband to Israel. In the New Testament, the church is called the bride of Jesus Christ.

We therefore commit spiritual adultery and are at "enmity" with our betrothed if we pursue "friendship with the world."

"Friendship with the world" is James's term for life that is lived as if this present world were our priority. It is life that is lived according to the values, desires and aspirations of this temporary realm.

If you are a Christian, God is not your enemy; but you can make yourself His enemy by putting your priority on this world.

Jas 4:5 Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"?

Commentators are in a tizzy over the fact they can find no single quote in the Old Testament "Scripture" that says this.

Have you ever said, "the Scripture says...", or, "the Bible says...", then summarized a basic teaching, rather than quoting a specific verse? That's what James's was doing.

God the Holy Spirit "dwells in us." The moment you receive Jesus Christ, God the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within you. Your human body becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit. Collectively, when we gather together, our church is His temple.

He "yearns jealously." What does the Holy Spirit yearn for? It's not a 'what,' it's a 'who.'

**You; He yearns for you.**

He yearns for you to yield to Him, so that He can lead you, and guide you, and gift you, and empower you.

He sees you as Jesus sees you - as completed, as perfect. But there is a lot of work to be done, day-by-day, to get you to that place. He is focused on changing you, on conforming you into the image of Jesus, on helping you fulfill Jesus' plan for your life. He yearns to protect you, too. He knows where your walk in worldliness will end - in destruction and ruin.

In the letter to Ephesus, the apostle Paul compares God the Holy Spirit to an engagement ring. He says the Holy Spirit is the "guarantee of our inheritance," (1:14), and that word "guarantee" is used of an engagement ring.

Think about a romantic engagement. The couple wants only to be together, all the time, to the exclusion of other relationships.



So long as we are on this earth, God the Holy Spirit wants us that way. We are the ones who, by yielding to the flesh instead of Him, ruin the romance.

He "yearns jealously." There is a good, godly, pure jealousy. It knows what is best, and works diligently to achieve it.

Jas 4:6 But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "GOD RESISTS THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE."

The prodigal son wanted out of his father's house. He demanded his inheritance. He went out into the world, and he indulged the pleasures of his flesh with riotous living.

His resources failed. He found himself feeding swine, eating their grain.

His father waited for him to return... Waited everyday. Until he finally did; and then they partied.

His father had to resist him while he walked in pride, but was quick to show grace when he humbled himself.

These Messianic Jews would have recognized the connection between the prodigal and themselves on account of what James said in verse three, about spending. True, the Gospel of Luke was not yet written. But the apostles had been teaching the sayings of Jesus for decades; and the parable of the prodigal son is a favorite.

They were prodigals, chasing after the world to fulfill their flesh. But in horror they'd realize they were doing so in their Father's house - right under His nose, so to speak.

The Holy Spirit who dwelt in them - that jealous Spirit - could thereby convict them of their sin, and recommend repentance.

James was calling them out to return to their first love; to return home in their hearts.

## #2 Are You A Stay-the-Course Progeny?

(v7-12)

"Progeny" can mean *a body of followers or disciples*. That describes us to a T. Instead of backsliding into the flesh, we ought to stay-the-course Jesus has set before us.

(What do you think? "Progeny" as a potential church name?).

James was addressing them as prodigals who had fallen, so these next verses describe what happens when a stay-at-home prodigal 'returns' to continue as a stay-the-course progeny.

[Jas 4:7 Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.](#)

They had been pursuing friendship with the world. You can bet that their "submit[ing] to God" would be met with opposition from the ruler and god of this world - from the "devil."

If I had to suggest a picture, it's as if, the moment you turn to return to Jesus, the devil is there, somehow, attempting to hinder you.

In Greek mythology, Antaeus blocked your path would challenge all passers-by to wrestling matches and remained invincible as long as he remained in contact with his mother, the earth.

Hercules easily defeated him by lifting him off the earth.

In our case, we don't lift the devil; we break our connection with the world, which is his realm. "Resist" means *take a stand against*. If you do, "he will flee from you."

This is a promise that you need not succumb to the devil and his lies as he tries to hinder your return to Jesus. Break your contact with the world and the devil is powerless.

Jas 4:8 Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

There is no use of the word "double-minded" in Greek literature before its use by James. He used the word once before in this letter, and it is used nowhere else in the New Testament.

James coined this special word to get his point across.

It is literally translated, *two-souled*. We do not have two souls. James was suggesting that, after we are born-again, we can *act* as if we have two souls - one facing the Lord, and the other facing the world.

The solution to backsliding is to "draw near to God." Come immediately, and just as you are. Like the prodigal son's father, He will immediately "draw near to you."

There you will have your sinning hands "cleanse[d]," and your duplicitous "hearts" "purif[ied]."

The cleansing and the purifying happen **to** you when you draw near. They are a result, *not* something you must do to earn God's favor. You don't clean-up your life before you turn to God. You turn to Him, and He does the cleaning.

The prodigal son had a plan to clean himself up, to return and be a servant in his father's house, but dad instantly restored him to being his son.

Jas 4:9 Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.

**This is advice for a returning prodigal.** It isn't how we ought to go around walking with Jesus as progeny.

When we become aware of our friendship with the world, we will "lament and mourn and weep"; and the reveling we were doing in the world will be replaced by "mourning" and "gloom."

Often we react this way because we realize we have destroyed something, or someone, by our lusts, and murders, and coveting.

Has your sin ever hit you like a ton of bricks? You stand there amidst the rubble of your life, and see the hurt you've caused others. You want so badly to go back in time; but it's too late to undo what you've done.

Thank God for grace and mercy in abundance at His throne.

Jas 4:10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

I liked a comment in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: "The lowly one becomes the lifted one."

When the prodigal son returned, this is how it went down:

Luk 15:21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

Luk 15:22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet.

Luk 15:23 And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry;

Luk 15:24 for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.

God will do something equivalent for you as His son or daughter.

Jas 4:11 Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

This verse seems a little out of place, almost as if James shifted to a new topic. He did not.

He's encouraged prodigals to return. Whenever they do, **those who have never left have a hard time receiving them back with grace. They are, in fact, judgmental.**

You know who that was supremely true of? The older brother of the prodigal son. When the party started, we read this:

Luk 15:28 "But [the brother] was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him.

Luk 15:29 So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends.

Luk 15:30 But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.'

Luk 15:31 "And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.

Luk 15:32 It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.' "

When we judge the prodigal, we are "speaking evil of the law."

What law? James wrote about it earlier - the law of love, that we love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and our neighbor as ourself.

Clearly the prodigal son's brother was not loving God, Who provides forgiveness; nor was he loving his brother.

Neither are we when we are bitter a sinning brother or sister has repented and returned, demanding that he or she prove their godly sorrow; or seeing them as a lesser believer.

Jas 4:12 There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?

God is not arbitrary in receiving back the prodigal. It's part of the work Jesus accomplished by dying on the Cross for our sins, then rising on the third day.

God determined, in eternity past, how He could redeem and restore lost men and women. It would be by grace, through faith.

He is the author of salvation, the One who has given us this law, so that we might get right with Him, and stay right.

After we are saved, we can lose the war within. We can war and fight; we can, and do, lust, murder, and covet.

But since the penalty for all our sin has been paid once-for-all by Jesus, there are no works we must do to earn God's presence - except to draw near to Him, to submit to Him, to return to Him.

Are you a stay-at-home prodigal? It can be hard to admit, because we mostly suffer from partial-prodigality.

There are those who are obviously in sin. Partial-prodigality is us harboring worldliness in one, or a few, areas of our hearts.

Repent and return before the ruin.

If you cannot identify with the prodigal, that's great. Just be careful you don't have the bitter heart of his older brother around your brothers and sisters who have been re-robed by our Father.

Enjoy Heaven's celebration for them.