

James Lesson 7 Article

Proper Prayers

James 4:3 As an afterthought, prayers are directed to God (lit. “you ask and you do not receive”), but not from a heart that is cleaving to him who is our greatest gift (lit. “because you ask wrongly”). Such prayers cannot lessen frustrated evil desire. No “spiritual benefit” is found under such psychological conditions from prayer. The imperative of prayer (1:5), of asking God for his provision, requires the prior knowledge of our true need. But the kind of asking practiced by some of James’s addressees is futile because it asks only on selfish and envious terms (lit. “in order that you may spend/squander in your pleasures”). As such, prayer becomes evil because of what is prayed for and why. Such prayers from the tongue, that is, the “world of evil” (3:6) within the body, are entirely rejected by the one to whom they are addressed.

The evil motives from which some have dared to shape their requests have their source, again, in evil desire, that is, their “pleasures” (v. 4:1). In such prayers God is regarded as a mere dispensary of instruments of vice. The language of monetary exchange is brought in by James. God does not answer their prayers not only because they are evil but also because they would just spend²⁹ his generosity on themselves. They would, as it were, simply “cash in” whatever they could exchange his gifts with for their idea of “gain.” This sort of religiosity represents the worst of pagan attitudes about deity. Indeed, such a heathen approach to God is at the heart of “friendship with the world” mentioned in the next verse.¹

²⁹ δαπανᾶω: “spend,” here in a wasteful way; cf. Luke 15:14.

¹ Richardson, K. A. (1997). *Vol. 36: James*. The New American Commentary (177–178). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.