

# James 4:5 Commentary

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See also [Overview Chart](#) by Charles Swindoll

## JAMES

Faith for Living

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FAITH AT WORK

### The Reactions of Living Faith to Worldliness

#### The reaction of living faith to selfish strife (James 4:1–5:12)

- A. The condition manifesting worldliness (James 4:1–6)
  1. The description of the condition (James 4:1–3)
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    - a. The adulterous character of worldliness (James 4:4)
      - (1) The question of rebuke (James 4:4a)
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- (1) The yearning of the Spirit (James 4:5b–6a)
- (2) The verification from Scripture (James 4:6b)
- B. The exhortation to the worldly (James 4:7–12)
  - 1. The call to return to God (James 4:7–10)
    - a. The statement of the basic demand (James 4:7)
      - (1) Nearness to God (James 4:8a)
      - (2) Personal cleansing (James 4:8b)
      - (3) Open repentance (James 4:9)
      - (4) Godly humility (James 4:10)
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    - a. The statement of the prohibition (James 4:11a)
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#### The reaction of living faith to presumptuous planning (4:13–17)

- A. The rebuke of their self-sufficient attitude (James 4:13–14)
  - 1. The delineation of the attitude (James 4:13)
  - 2. The presumption in the attitude (James 4:14)
- B. The indication of the proper attitude (James 4:15)
- C. The evil of their present attitude (James 4:16–17)
  - 1. The evil of their boasting (James 4:16)
  - 2. The sin of their inconsistency (James 4:17) (Hiebert - [James - Highly Recommended](#))

James 4:5 **Or** do you **think** that the **Scripture speaks** to no purpose: "He **jealously desires** the **Spirit which He has made to dwell in us**"? ([NASB: Lockman](#))

**Greek:** [e dokeite \(2PPAI\) hoti kenos e graphe legei. \(3SPAI\) pros phthonon epipothei \(3SPAI\) to pneuma o katokisen \(3SAAI\) en hemin?](#)

#### THE FOLLOWING TRANSLATIONS RENDER SPIRIT WITH A CAPITAL "S"

1. **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? ([Amplified Bible - Lockman](#))
2. **Darby:** Think ye that the scripture speaks in vain? Does the Spirit which has taken his abode in us desire enviously?
3. **GWT:** Do you think this passage means nothing? It says, "The Spirit that lives in us wants us to be his own."
4. **ICB:** Do you think the Scripture means nothing? It says, "The Spirit that God made to live in us wants us for himself alone."
5. **ISV:** Or do you think the Scripture means nothing when it says that the Spirit that God caused to live in us jealously yearns for us?
6. **MLB (Berkley):** Or do you suppose the Scripture speaks to no purpose? The Spirit, who took up His abode in us, yearns jealously over us
7. **NKJV:** Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"?
8. **Phillips:** Do you think what the scriptures have to say about this is a mere formality? Or do you imagine that this spirit of passionate jealousy is the Spirit he has caused to live in us? ([Phillips: Touchstone](#))
9. **TLB:** Or what do you think the Scripture means when it says that the Holy Spirit, whom God has placed within us, watches over us with tender jealousy
10. **Weymouth:** Or do you suppose that it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "The Spirit which He has caused to dwell in our hearts yearns jealously over us"?
11. **WBC:** Or do you really imagine there is no ground in what Scripture says: the Spirit God made to dwell in us opposes envy? (Ralph Martin)
12. **Wuest:** Or, do you think that the scripture says in an empty manner and to no purpose, The Spirit who has been caused to make His permanent home in us has a passionate desire to the point of envy

#### THE FOLLOWING TRANSLATIONS RENDER SPIRIT WITH A SMALL "s"

1. **ASV**: Or think ye that the scripture speaketh in vain? Doth the spirit which he made to dwell in us long unto envying?
2. **BBE**: Or does it seem to you that it is for nothing that the holy Writings say, The spirit which God put into our hearts has a strong desire for us?
3. **ESV**: Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"?
4. **KJV**: Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?
5. **Macent**: or do you imagine that passage of scripture to be insignificant, "does the spirit that dwells in you, incite you to vice?"
6. **Moffatt**: What, do you consider this is an idle word of scripture?—"He yearns jealously for the spirit he set within us.'
7. **Montgomery**: Or do you suppose that it is in vain that the Scripture says, "The spirit which has its home in us yearns over us unto jealousy?"
8. **NAB**: Or do you suppose that the scripture speaks without meaning when it says, "The spirit that he has made to dwell in us tends toward jealousy"?
9. **NET**: Or do you think the scripture means nothing when it says, "The spirit that God caused to live within us has an envious yearning"?
10. **NIV**: Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?
11. **NJB**: Can you not see the point of the saying in scripture, 'The longing of the spirit he sent to dwell in us is a jealous longing.'?
12. **NLT**: What do you think the Scriptures mean when they say that the spirit God has placed within us is filled with envy? (Or that God longs jealously for the human spirit he has placed within us? or that the Holy Spirit, whom God has placed within us, opposes our envy?) ([NLT - Tyndale House](#))
13. **NRSV**: Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"?
14. **Young's Literal**: Do ye think that emptyly the Writing saith, `To envy earnestly desireth the spirit that did dwell in us,'

### Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: e dokeite (2PPAI) hoti kenos e graphe legei, (3SPAI)

- John 7:42; 10:35; 19:37; Romans 9:17; Galatians 3:8
- [James 4 Resources](#) - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries

#### Related Passages:

Isaiah 55:11 So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

Galatians 3:8 (EXAMPLE OF SCRIPTURE PERSONIFIED) And the **Scripture**, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, **preached the gospel** beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS SHALL BE BLESSED IN YOU."

## A DIFFICULT PASSAGE TO TRANSLATE & INTERPRET

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 (see below for discussion of the verb **to dwell**) but also the question of how the Greek text is most accurately interpreted grammatically. The following discussion will briefly discuss these problematic areas but the interested reader is referred to more academic resources for more detail. 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.

**Or do you think** - Parallels the introduction to Jas 4:4 **"do you not know"**. The **"or"** introduces a question which addresses their attitude toward the authority of Scripture. Scripture speaks but do you think it speaks for no reason or without reason? Is the message which **the Scripture** speaks purposeless, so that it has no authoritative claim on how we conduct ourselves? While most of us would quickly respond with an emphatic "No, Scripture does not speak to me without purpose", our conduct many times

unfortunately answers "Yes"!

**The Scripture speaks** - Scripture is personified. And rightly so for when we read the pages of Scripture, we are reading living and active (energetic) words (Heb 4:12+, cf Isa 55:11), the words of God spoken to us. So when Scripture speaks, God speaks. **Are you (am I) listening (like young Samuel)?** (1Sa 3:9, 10+) Speaks is in the present tense - Scripture *continually* speaks. And so we should *continually* listen, taking care to be doers and not merely hearers only, deluding ourselves. (James 1:22+)

While this phrase in the first half of this verse would be expected to introduce a definite OT reference in the second half, there is no obvious passage of Scripture (OT or NT) that contains the words of the assumed quotation. Many explanations have been offered in an attempt to explain this enigma, but none are conclusive.

Ideas include (1) James quoted from some unknown apocryphal work (2) The quote is an unrecorded statement of James' half brother Jesus. (3) James quotes from some NT passage. (4) James was paraphrasing an OT passage. (5) James was not quoting a specific single passage, but is summarizing truths found in several OT passages. (6) Finally, some commentators (and Bible translations) do not treat the first half of verse 5 as a "formula" introducing a quotation but as a sentence which stands by itself. Several of the translations emphasize this latter view by dividing verse 5 into two separate sentences...

Or think ye that the scripture speaketh in vain? Doth the spirit which he made to dwell in us long unto envying?  
(ASV)

Think ye that the scripture speaks in vain? Does the Spirit which has taken his abode in us desire enviously?  
(Darby)

Do you think what the scriptures have to say about this is a mere formality? Or do you imagine that this spirit of passionate jealousy is the Spirit he has caused to live in us? (Phillips)

Or think ye that, in vain, the scripture speaketh? Is it, for envying, that the spirit which hath taken an abode within us doth crave? (Rotherdam)

**Hiebert** favors two separate sentences and comments that "Lanski supports the view that verse 5 consists of two sentences by pointing out that the wording of the first part of the verse never occurs elsewhere as a formula of quotation; he insists, "If a quotation were to follow, we should certainly expect the addition, `saying that.' ([James - Highly Recommended](#))

**Gill** explains that it "seems best of all to conclude that the apostle has no regard to any one particular passage of Scripture, in which the following words are expressly had, since no such passage appears; but that his meaning is, the sense of the Scripture everywhere, where it speaks of this matter, is to this purpose: nor does it say this, or any thing else in vain; whatever is written there is to answer some end, as for learning, edification, and comfort, for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness." ([Gill's Expository Notes](#))

**Hiebert** goes on to add that "When the first part of Jas 4:5 is accepted as a separate question, by (his use of the phrase) **the Scripture** James is seen to refer to the teaching of the Scriptures as a whole, which supports the truth already declared in Jas 4:4, that man cannot love both God and the world at the same time. If the readers are prone to question the truth of what James had just said, as might be implied from their conduct, does that mean that they regard the teaching of Scripture—that worldliness and godliness cannot exist together—as without abiding authority? We accept the rendering of the ASV which makes two sentences of verse 5, as the most probable solution. ([James - Highly Recommended](#))

**No purpose** (2756) (**kenos**) means literally to be without something material and thus means empty or without content. It was used with the literal meaning (as in Mk 12:3 "they took him and beat him and sent him away **empty handed**"). Figuratively, **kenos** refers to endeavors, labors, acts, which result in nothing and thus are vain, fruitless, without effect and will not succeed. **Kenos** can also refer to that which is devoid of intellectual, moral, or spiritual value.

It appears then that in the present passage James is asking his readers if they think the Scripture lacks effectiveness, is useless, is of no purpose or is unable to produce results. When the passage is read in this way, it becomes essentially a rebuke to the readers.

**He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us: pros phthonon epipothēi (3SPA1) to pneuma o katokisen (3SAA1) en hemin:**

- Genesis 4:5,6; 6:5; 8:21; 26:14; 30:1; 37:11; Nu 11:29; Ps 37:1; 106:16; Pr 21:10; Eccl 4:4; Isa 11:13; Acts 7:9; Ro 1:29; Titus 3:3
- [James 4 Resources](#)

## Related Passages:

Exodus 34:14 –for you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God–

Zechariah 8:2 “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘I am exceedingly jealous for Zion, yes, with great wrath I am jealous for her.’

2 Corinthians 11:2 For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin.

Ezekiel 36:5-6 therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, “Surely in the fire of My jealousy I have spoken against the rest of the nations, and against all Edom, who appropriated My land for themselves as a possession with wholehearted joy and with scorn of soul, to drive it out for a prey.” 6 ‘Therefore, prophesy concerning the land of Israel, and say to the mountains and to the hills, to the ravines and to the valleys, “Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘Behold, I have spoken in My jealousy and in My wrath because you have endured the insults of the nations.’

Genesis 2:7 Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

John 14:17 that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you.

Romans 8:9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.

1 Corinthians 6:19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?

Ezekiel 36:27 “And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

The interpretation of the latter portion of James 4:5 is **even more difficult** than the first section and there is no clear consensus. There are at least 4 points of difficulty:

- (1) Is the word **spirit** the subject or the object of the main verb **desires**?
- (2) Is the **spirit** to be written with a little or big "s"? In other words is James referring to the Holy Spirit (which would be his only reference in the book) or to the spirit of man?
- (3) Is the phrase **jealously desires** to be understood in a good or bad sense?
- (4) Finally, is James making a statement or asking a question?

In the Greek this sentence begins with the preposition **pros** which generally describes direction toward and in this case would describe the direction toward which the jealousy (or envy) is directed. For example, the **NIV** renders this phrase "tends toward envy" while the **New English Bible** renders it "turns towards envious desires". One can readily see from these renderings that **jealously desires** has a negative connotation and this would indicate the passage could hardly refer to the Holy Spirit! One wordsmith, Bishop Trench, in fact has written (somewhat dogmatically) of phthonos (see below) that it "is used always and only in an evil signification." To reiterate, if one interprets **jealously** in this way, the **NAS** rendering would be difficult to accept (but see discussion under **jealously**). The KJV marginal reading is not far from the NAS, reading "the Spirit that dwelt in us loveth us to jealousy" (Jas 4:5, KJV, marginal reading)

**Jealously** ([5355](#)) (**phthonos**) in most NT uses describes not just wanting what another person has, but also resenting that person for having it. **Phthonos** thus is generally given a negative connotation in biblical usage. Carson says that **phthonos** was occasionally used in secular Greek to describe "the jealous feeling of a lover towards a rival." Such a meaning would be compatible with the **NAS** interpretation that it is the Spirit of God Who **jealously desires**.

**Hiebert** adds that "the nouns **phthonos** [envy] and **zelos** [zeal, jealousy] were sometimes used interchangeably. **Phthonos** was occasionally used in Greek writers of the jealousy of the Olympian gods," (Douglas Moo - "The Letter of James") and both terms were "often used for the `jealousy' of God (1Mac. 8:16; T Sim. 4.5; T. Gad. 7.2; 1 Clem. 3.2; 4.7; 5.2)." (Ralph Martin, Word Biblical Commentary) So understood, the expression (**jealously desires**, NAS) could be used to describe God's unwillingness to share man's affections with the world (Ed: The affection for which James has just warned his readers in Jas 4:4+). ([James - Highly Recommended](#))

**Dobson**, et al write that *pros phthonos* "when taken adverbially, **“the Spirit that dwells in us lusts jealously,”** speaks of divine

jealousy, a familiar doctrine to these Jews (Ex 20:5; 34:14; Zech 8:2). (Online [KJV Bible Commentary](#))

**Desires** (1971) (**epipotheo** from **epi** = intensifies + **potheo** = to yearn) means to have a strong desire for something, with implication of need. It mean to long for, have great affection for, yearn for someone or something. The **present tense** indicates this strong desire is continual. **Epipotheo** is used elsewhere in the NT always to express longing in a good sense and not to express an evil desire (See the 9 NT uses: Ro 1:11; 2Co 5:2; 9:14; Php 1:8; 2:26; 1Th3:6; 2Ti 1:4; Jas 4:5; 1Pe 2:2). **Ropes** remarks that **epipotheo** was even used to describe "the longing affection of the lover." (cp uses of *epipotheo* in the Lxx - Ps 42:1, Ps 119:20, 131)

The Greek scholar **A T Robertson** comments that the phrase (*pros phthonon epipothei*) is "A difficult phrase... (and if) God (is) presented as a jealous lover, does *to pneuma* (the spirit) refer to the Holy Spirit as the subject of *epipothei* or to man's spirit as the object of *epipothei*? Probably the former and *epipothei* then means to yearn after in the good sense as in Phil. 1:8. ([Word Pictures](#))

**Spirit** (4151) (**pneuma**) in the present context can be taken as either the subject (NET = "*The spirit that God caused to live within us has an envious yearning*") or the object (ESV = "*He yearns jealously over the spirit*") of the verb **desires** and to further complicate the picture can be interpreted as a reference to either the human spirit or the Holy Spirit. The various translations at the beginning of this note ([click](#)) have been divided into those who interpret **pneuma** as the Divine **Spirit** or the human **spirit**.

**To dwell** - The specific Greek verb which is translated **to dwell** is also in dispute. Most modern translations favor **katoikizo** while the KJV (based on the Greek Textus Receptus) favors the verb **katoikeo**.

**Katoikizo** (no unique Strong's # - some resources list it with *katoikeo* [2730](#)) is used only here in James 4:5 (but used 40x in the non-apocryphal Septuagint) and means to cause to dwell, to establish, to settle. **Katoikizo** is the verb which most scholars favor as the one James intended. **BDAG** writes that **katoikizo** is used in James 4:5 "of the Spirit" (BDAG favors the Holy Spirit) and so renders this phrase as "the Spirit which (God) has caused to live in us." **Louw & Nida** on the other hand favors the spirit of man and so renders it "the spirit that (God) caused to dwell in us" or "the spirit that (God) put within us". The confused reader can begin to see the difficulties and disagreements among respected scholars regarding the basic rendering of James 4:5!

**Katoikeo** ([2730](#)) is the much more commonly used Greek verb (45x in 43 NT verses) meaning literally to reside and figuratively speaking of God dwelling in the heart (1Co 3:16), of demons dwelling humans (Mt 12:45), of God dwelling in the temple (Mt. 23:21), of Satan dwelling where Antipas was killed (Rev. 2:13), of Christ dwelling in His people by faith (Eph 3:17), of the fullness of God dwelling in Christ (Col. 1:19), of the fullness of Deity dwelling in Christ bodily (Col 2:9), and of righteousness dwelling in the new heaven and earth (2Pe 3:13).

The **NET Bible** note says that...

Both because of the absence of an explicit subject and the relative scarcity of the causative **katoikizo** ("cause to dwell") compared to the intransitive **katoikeo** (live, dwell") in Biblical Greek... it is easy to see why scribes would replace *katokisen* with *katokesen* (**Ed**: Replacing "**i**" with an "**e**" changes the root verb [lemma] from *katoikizo* to *katoikeo*)... On internal and external grounds, **katokisen** is the preferred reading. (**Ed**: In other words, the NET Bible translators and most other scholars favor the conclusion that James used the rare verb **katoikizo** rather than the more common verb **katoikeo** which is favored by the Greek Textus Receptus [KJV]. **Are you confused yet?**)

**Hiebert** a highly respected expositor summarizes the textual and grammatical conundrum as follows...

When the second half of Jas 4:5 is accepted as a separate sentence, is it to be punctuated as a question or as a declarative statement? The ASV makes it a question, but its contents may equally be regarded as a declarative statement." Its close connection with the statement in the first part of Jas 4:6 supports the view that this is also a statement of fact. We accept it as a statement of fact made by James. In view of the grammatical structure, there are four possibilities as to the intended meaning:

#### 1. The human spirit as the object of the main verb:

"He [God] yearns enviously for the spirit which He caused to dwell in us."

Then the meaning is that God, who placed man's spirit in him at creation, longs for its total loyalty and devotion to Him.

#### 2. The divine Spirit as the object of the verb:

"He [God] yearns enviously for the Spirit which He caused to dwell in us."

But it is difficult to see how one member of the Trinity should be pictured as enviously longing for another. This

alternative is highly improbable.

### 3. The human spirit as the subject of the main verb:

"The spirit which He made to dwell in us longs enviously"

Then the meaning is that the human spirit, imparted at creation, longs perversely for enjoyment of the world's pleasures, even to the point of envy. Then James charges his readers with perverseness in being cool toward God while yearning for the world's pleasures.

### 4. The divine Spirit as the subject of the verb:

"The Spirit which He made to dwell in us yearns enviously"

Then the meaning is that the Holy Spirit, imparted to us by God at conversion, yearns enviously for our total loyalty and devotion to Him. The incoming Holy Spirit, Who sealed our redemption, justly claims our undivided love. He can brook no rival for our affection. The only reference to the Holy Spirit in this epistle is under the second and fourth views.

In view of the rebuke to worldliness that James is administering to his Christian readers, the last view seems most probable. Then this reference to the Holy Spirit's reaction to their worldliness fittingly expresses a further ground for censure. This view harmonizes with the natural force of the relative clause. The assertion that God caused the Spirit to dwell in believers is a central teaching of the New Testament (Acts 5:32; Ro 8:11; Gal. 4:6; 2Ti 1:14). The better-attested verb "causes to live" (*katokisen*) most naturally points to a distinctive experience that is not true of all men and is best taken as referring directly to the Spirit's impartation at regeneration. This view also gives the most natural meaning to "us" as restricted to Christians. This picture of the Holy Spirit's yearning for the undivided love of His people, and grudgingly refusing to yield to a rival, is consistent with the statement in Galatians 5:17 concerning the Spirit's opposition to the lusts of the flesh. This view also is supported by the assertion in the first part of verse 6, which stands in close connection with verse 5b. ([James - Highly Recommended](#))

The **ESV Study Bible** comments that...

God created mankind with a "**spirit**," and he deeply desires that our spirits worship Him (cf. John 4:23,24). Some interpreters believe the verse speaks of **human jealousy** ("*The spirit that he has made to live in us envies intensely*"). But the idea of **divine jealousy** fits the context best, since the surrounding verses (James 4:4, 6, 7, 8) deal with man's relationship with God. (**ESV** = "*He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us*")

The **Handbook on the Letter to James** has five alternative translations and has the following note on translation #4 (consult the [UBS NT Handbook](#) for all five possibilities with the pros and cons of each)...

"**The Spirit he caused to live in us longs jealously**" (NIV second alternative rendering). In this instance the Holy Spirit is the subject of yearning. But God is the one who caused the Holy Spirit to live in us. The verb phrase "to yearn jealously" is taken in the good sense of "to long jealously for our full devotion," or "to love us passionately." What James appears to say here, then, is that Christians are indwelt by God's Spirit, and that the Spirit longs for the undivided loyalty and the love of God's people. The unstated application of this is that it would be inconceivable for Christians to continue to live in accordance with their own sinful desires and passions.

To think of the Holy Spirit as dwelling in human beings is a concept well known in the Bible (Ro 8.11; 1Co3.16). The indwelling in human beings is the act and purpose of God. It makes more sense to say that God placed the Holy Spirit in us, rather than to say that he placed in us the human spirits with tendency to sin. However, the difficulty is that this would be the only reference to the Holy Spirit in the book, and this is considered by some scholars as most unlikely. Furthermore it would be unnatural to link the Holy Spirit with envy and jealousy. For this reason we would have to interpret the word "jealousy" in the good sense of a strong desire to love and care. This, to some scholars, is contrary to its normal usage in the New Testament, and it is therefore considered to be doubtful. ([The United Bible Societies' New Testament Handbook Series](#))

**Thomas Constable** notes that James 4:5...

is very difficult to translate this statement, but the best rendering seems to be something such as the following. "*God jealously longs for the spirit that He made to live in us.*" Another translation is, "*the Spirit which he made to dwell in us jealously yearns for the entire devotion of the heart*" (cf. Ro 8:11; 1Co 3:16; Gal. 4:6; Ep 4:30; Jn

7:39; 16:7). Both translations fit the preceding context well. God's people who love the world have committed spiritual adultery against Him (Jas 4:4-note), but God (or His Spirit) jealously longs for their love (Jas 4:5). ([James Expository Notes](#))

**Nystrom** asks...

What is the subject and what is the object of the verb "**longs for**" (*epipothei*)? The **NIV** has chosen to muddy the waters by conflating (bringing together, combining two readings of a text into a composite whole) two consecutive Greek terms, *phthonon* ("envy, jealousy") and *epipothei* ("express strong desire for") (**NIV** = "*the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely*"). It is best to treat *phthonon* as an adverb ("with envy, with jealousy, jealously") and to see "God" as the subject and "the spirit" as the object of the verb. This leaves us with the following translation: "*Out of jealousy he [God] longs for the spirit that he [God] made to live in us.*" This is the interpretation chosen by the NRSV ("*God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us*") (cf. **NIV footnote** = "*that God jealously longs for the spirit that he made to live in us*" or "*that the Spirit he caused to live in us longs jealously*"). Other renderings are, of course, possible and grammatically defensible. The subject could be the Holy Spirit, in which case the translation would be, "*The Holy Spirit that he sent to live in us desires us for himself alone.*" This, however, leaves us not distantly removed from where we find ourselves if God is the subject.

**In any case, the point is, plainly, that God desires with all of His heart for us to come home and to live with and in Him, for us to ask for His wisdom. Instead, we follow the wisdom of the world** (cp Jas 3:15, 16, 17, Jas 4:4-note), **whether knowingly or unwittingly, and by following that errant path we can never achieve what we truly seek.** ((NIV Application Commentary, New Testament: James. David P. Nystrom, Page 227. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) (Bolding added)

**Donald Burdick** also commenting on Jas 4:5 in the NIV adds that...

there is good reason to believe that the translation given in the NIV footnote for the last part of the verse is correct, "*that God jealously longs for the spirit that he made to live in us*" This rendering fits the immediate context better than the NIV text, "that the spirit he caused to live in us tends toward envy." Jas 4:4-note, which is closely tied to Jas 4:5 by the conjunction "**or**," indicates that the believer who is a friend of the world is guilty of spiritual adultery. Although his love and devotion belong to God, he has fallen in love with the world. It is natural, therefore, to expect Jas 4:5 to speak of God's jealous longing for His people's love, rather than of their envious spirit. And there are OT passages that refer to God as jealously desiring the devotion of His people. Since there is no passage of which James 4:5 is a verbatim quotation, it is best to understand it as giving the gist of such passages as Ex 20:5 and Ex 34:14...

It is much better... to translate *pros phthonon epipothei* as "longs jealously for." Thus, in Jas 4:4-note James has accused his readers of spiritual unfaithfulness. If they are not willing to accept this indictment, he asks in Jas 4:5 what they think about the OT passages dealing with God's jealous longing for His people. This is the significance of the introductory conjunction "**or**." Do they think Scripture speaks "without reason" or emptily? Of course they don't think this. Consequently, it is necessary to believe that friendship with the world is enmity toward God, and thus it is spiritual unfaithfulness. ([Gaebelein, F. Editor: Expositor's Bible Commentary 6-Volume New Testament. Zondervan Publishing](#) or [Pradis = computer version](#))

**Warren Wiersbe** says "Living for the flesh means grieving the Holy Spirit of God Who lives in us (Eph 4:30+)... just as the world is the enemy of God the Father, so the **flesh** is the enemy of God the Holy Spirit. There is a holy, loving jealousy that a husband and wife have over each other, and rightly so. **The Spirit within jealously guards our relationship to God, and the Spirit is grieved when we sin against God's love.** ([Wiersbe, W: Bible Exposition Commentary. 1989. Victor](#))

The **Wycliffe Bible Commentary** reminds us that "God is a jealous God (cf. Ex 20:5; 34:14; Dt 32:16; Zech 8:2; 1Co 10:22), and hence He will not tolerate divided allegiance. ([Pfeiffer, C F: Wycliffe Bible Commentary. 1981. Moody](#))

**Comment:** See Dt 4:23, 24, 25, 26; 6:14, 15; Josh 24:19, 20 for other OT verses [among many] that describe God as jealous and as the One Who forbids idolatry remembering that an **idol** would be like a "lover" with which a believer seeks companionship, committing adultery with their true Husband, Jehovah. If human husbands become angered by a wife's adultery, how much more right would God have to be jealous toward His unfaithful wife?! (see Pr 6:32, 33, 34, 35-notes)

**Motyer** - God's people are indwelt by God's Spirit and there is no way in which the living presence of that Spirit is compatible with those sinful yearnings and promptings to self-interest which are destructive of the peace of the church. (Motyer, J. A. The Message of James: The Tests of Faith: Inter-Varsity Press)

**Adrian Rogers** in his sermon on this verse says "Now, while that verse is somewhat hard to interpret, what it really means is this: I'm convinced, that the Holy Spirit within us is very, very jealous for the cause of Christ. And, the Scripture says that over and over again, that God has given the Holy Spirit to us and the Holy Spirit within us is there to glorify Christ and to promote the cause of Christ. And, it is absolutely essential that you understand this if you are to pray vitally, because this is what we call praying in the Spirit. And, so that's what we're going to be talking about tonight, "[How to Pray in the Spirit](#)"" (go to page 415)

**David Guzik** - **The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously**: The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit has a jealous yearning for our friendship with God. The Spirit will convict the Christian who lives in compromise.

**Lehman Strauss** - We might paraphrase this to read as follows: "**The Spirit, who hath taken up His abode in us, enviously yearns over us.**" I have capitalized the word Spirit, for I believe James is referring to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, indwelling us, is longing after something: namely, to make us wholly Christ's, to bring us to the place where we have no divided allegiance. The Holy Spirit has just one envy, one desire, one longing; that is, our entire devotion to Jesus Christ. God warned His people of old time to have no other gods, neither to bow down to them, for, said He: "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God" (Dt 5:1-9). This is the intense desire of divine love, and the dispensations do not alter it. God's pure and perfect love for us yearns over us, for He too longs to be loved by His own. This is the consistent teaching of all Scripture, and it is not mere vain (or empty) teaching. No teaching in the Word of God can be labeled meaningless.

The popular preacher and Bible expositor **R. Kent Hughes** writes "I am convinced that the text refers to the Holy Spirit's jealousy over us because it best fits the argument of the context (**ED: I LIKE THAT BECAUSE CONTEXT IS KING IN INTERPRETATION!**) and because it touches on that grand truth so indispensable to the New Testament theology—the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Understanding that the Holy Spirit's jealousy for us is what is meant here opens a heart-changing truth to us: even when we sin by seeking our pleasures in friendship with the world (Jas 4:4-note), we are greatly loved, for jealousy is an essential element of true love. We are brides of Christ, and the Holy Spirit does not want us to go somewhere else to "have our needs met." The Holy Spirit's true love for us evokes a proper intolerance of straying affection. The personalness of this ought to steel us against wandering. This jealous Spirit is inside us. When we sin, He is pained! Furthermore, His jealousy is passionate, for the idea in the Greek (epithoeo) is that He longs or yearns for us with an intense jealousy. To realize that the awesomely holy God who transcends the universe and is wholly other and self-contained is at the same time personally and passionately and lovingly jealous for our affection—this realization ought to stop any of our "affairs" with the world and cause us to prostrate our souls adoringly before him. How we are loved! And how we ought to love! For as John informs us, "We love because he first loved us" (1Jn 4:19). (See [James: Faith That Works](#))

**George Stulac** in the **IVP NT Commentary** series has a well done analysis of this difficult section of James. After assessing alternative interpretations ([see his discussion](#)), **Stulac** explains why he favors the NAS (and the NIV marginal translation) noting first that...

the subject of the verb (**desires**) is the understood He, referring to God. The object of His yearning is the spirit He caused to live in us. This spirit could be either the created human spirit or the Holy Spirit given to Christians, though the former seems more likely because it is consistent with James's only other reference to "spirit" in Jas 2:26-note. In either case, the meaning is that God jealously desires us to belong wholeheartedly to Him. (Even if one takes the Jerusalem Bible or Living Bible rendering with "spirit" referring to the Holy Spirit as the subject of the clause, one is left with the same meaning: that God jealously desires us.)

The arguments making this understanding of Jas 4:5 preferable are the following.

**1. Linguistic.** Two terms for "envy," phthonos and zelos, are sometimes interchangeable, and zelos is used elsewhere of God. James would be choosing this more unusual use of phthonos simply for stylistic contrast, since he recently used zelos negatively of human envy in Jas 3:14 and Jas 3:16.

**2. Grammatical.** It is more natural to have the same subject for the two verbs **yearns** (desires) and **caused to live** (made to dwell).

**3. Contextual.** An emphasis on God's jealousy for righteousness in us is equally consistent with what James has emphasized in the letter.

**4. Logical.** A reference to **human envy** here would be awkward, because it would seem to ignore the point to which James has come in Jas 4:4-note and would instead return to his point in Jas 4:1-3. On the other hand, a reference to God's jealousy fits the flow of thought well. The point of Jas 4:4 logically raises the objection "**How does friendship with the world make me an enemy of God?**" James would be answering this in Jas 4:5 by reminding us of God's jealousy. Then Jas 4:6-note would follow as a reminder of God's grace to the humble, which protects us from being overwhelmed by God's jealousy. ([George Stulac - IVP NT Commentary - James](#))

**Ralph Martin** explains that...

there is another argument that speaks against construing "the human spirit" as the subject of *epipothēi* (**desires**). To take Jas 4:5b as a Scriptural confirmation of human jealousy would require that the author has returned to his description of human nature in Jas 4:1, 2, 3, but in Jas 4:4-note James has issued a call to repentance, warning his readers that friendship with the world means enmity with God. Thus, more than likely, Jas 4:5 is set down to highlight God's displeasure with the behavior reported in Jas 4:1-4. To conclude, therefore, that the subject of *epipothēi* is the human spirit is fraught with much difficulty.

If it is the divine Spirit (taking God as the subject of *katokisen*, a hapax legomenon = only Biblical use) which opposes envy, then we have an understanding of Jas 4:5 that continues the flow of Jas 4:4. Even though many interpreters prefer to take God as the subject of *epipothēi* Hort, p 93, 94; Ropes, p 263; Dibelius, p 223, 24; Mayor, p 144,145; Mussner, p 142, 43), the same thought could be expressed in terms of God at work in the believer through the Holy Spirit, which opposes the jealous or envious tendencies of our "earthly" human nature. As a result the effect of "godly wisdom" should prevail. God opposes those who fight and war within the church, and he has placed his Spirit within His people to combat that tendency. Therefore, it is God's jealousy that is described in Jas 4:5, for He stands waiting for the belligerent to forsake their envy of others and direct their attention back to Him. (SEE [James, Volume 48 - Page 151](#) Page 150)

**John Piper** (Godward Life - Book Two) commenting on Jas 4:2, 4, 4 writes that...

James has in his mind a picture of people who use prayer to try to get from God something they desire more than God. He calls these people—men and women—"**adulteresses**." Why? Because in his mind God is like our husband Who is jealous to be our highest delight. If we then try to make prayer a means of getting from Him something we want more than we want Him, we are like a wife who asks her husband for money to visit another lover.

As if it were not clear enough, James explains (in Jas 4:5) why this is offensive to God: **He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us.**" In other words, God is jealous to be the object of our spirits greatest delight. And Jas 4:4 says, if we become "friends" with the world, we become "enemies" of God. That means if we find our most satisfying relationships with others besides God, we make him our enemy. God is either our first and greatest delight, or he is our enemy.

**F B Meyer** in **Our Daily Homily**...

#### **THE SPIRIT... YEARNETH FOR US EVEN UNTO JEALOUS ENVY.**

James 4:5 (RV, marginal reading).

A VERY deep and remarkable verse! The apostle is contending against the worldliness which was so rife among the believers he was addressing. They were set on pleasure; they sought the friendship of the world, and became unfaithful to their divine Lover; they were proud and high-minded. He went so far as to speak of them as adulterers and adulteresses (Jas 4:4); and then adopting a gentler, pleading tone, he says,

"You are grieving the gentle Holy Spirit who has come to dwell within you, who yearns with a jealous envy to possess your entire nature for Himself."

The Spirit of God dwells within thee, O believer in Jesus Christ. If a man have not the Spirit of God, he is none of His; and since thou art undoubtedly one of us, thou hast most certainly the Holy Spirit (Ro 8:11-note). But the mistake of thy life consists in this, that He hath not thee. Some part of thy heart is given, but not all; and this causes Him the most exquisite pain, like that which we suffer from jealousy.

No keener pain is possible to the heart of man than to have good reason for the belief that a loved one is not wholly true; that there has been an alienation of affection which was once whole and entire; that another is receiving a part at least of the heart's devotion. The fire and screw are light in comparison with our anguish then; but, this is what the Spirit of God suffers when we share between Him and the world that love which should be all His own. "I, the Lord thy God am a jealous God," is as true as when first spoken from Sinai. The person of Jesus Christ must be the Sun of our system, though that system may include many planets beside.

God Himself, with the intensity of covenantal jealousy, yearns over and longs for the Spirit He has established within us. The Holy Spirit indwelling the believer is the object of God's exclusive desire. When we give the world what belongs to God, whether it is our time, affection, devotion, worship, etc, we are not merely breaking a rule but are walking into the "cross hairs" of divine jealousy. This

is a serious issue. God does not sit quietly while His sons and daughters commit spiritual adultery. In fact, the reason more grace is available (Jas 4:6) is precisely because the situation is so severe, so He gives grace proportionate to the gravity of the problem ("a greater grace").

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Practical Application: The love of God for His people is not comfortable, clinical, or detached. It is the love of a covenant Husband who takes exclusive rights seriously. To flirt with the world — to give the world the devotion, attention, and affection that belongs to God — is to awaken the holy jealousy described here. This is not a threat designed to intimidate but a revelation of the depth of God's love. You cannot be jealous about something you don't deeply value. God's jealousy for us is the measure of His love of us.

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**Michael Andrus** applies this passage first noting "Verse 5 is difficult to translate, and your Bible probably has several footnotes offering various translations. I think the best is the NASB translation: "God jealously longs for the spirit that He made to live in us." "Spirit" here is probably not a reference to the Holy Spirit, but rather to the human spirit, and the point is that **God jealousy desires our total allegiance.** (ED: BOTH THE NASB77 AND NASB95 CAPITALIZE **SPIRIT** CONTRA TO ANDRUS' STATEMENT) He is intolerant of rivalry or unfaithfulness. He will not play second fiddle to anyone. He wants us to be in the world but not of it. Friends, it's not difficult to be a friend of the world and a friend of God at the same time; its impossible! Of course, that doesn't mean it's impossible to be a friend of worldly people; rather one can't be a friend of the world-system—meaning its priorities, its goals, its sensualities, its securities, its strategies. Let me just stop here and ask this morning, **"Is your love quotient for the world stirring up the jealousy of God?"** Think about your attitude toward possessions, prosperity, security, sports, pleasure, stewardship, and even church? Are those attitudes worldly or are they godly?

**ILLUSTRATION** - A Washington D.C. pastor whose church was attended frequently by President Carter in the late 70's received a phone call early one Sunday morning: *"Can you tell me if the President is expected to attend church today?"* *"That,"* the pastor patiently replied, *"I cannot promise, but we do expect God to be here, and we fancy that will be sufficient incentive for a reasonably large attendance."*

Even in our worship we can be found fighting against God. Now what exactly is the connection between the believers' fraternizing with the enemy and thus stirring up the jealousy of God, on the one hand, and conflict in the church on the other hand? I think it is this: If we're not at peace with God, we cannot be at peace with ourselves, and if we're not at peace with ourselves we cannot be at peace with others. It's just a vicious cycle. ([Understanding Conflict: A Prerequisite to Peacemaking](#))

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**GOD'S JEALOUS SPIRIT** - Do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"? James 4:5

Shep, the newest member of our family, is a young Shetland sheepdog who openly displays his jealousy when I kiss my wife. He doesn't snarl or bite, but in the language of barking he seems to be saying "Hey, Master, you belong to me!" His jealousy gives me a good feeling. After all, don't we all like someone to care that much about us?

There's another kind of jealousy -- a righteous jealousy -- at work in the life of every Christian. It's not the yearning of a subject for his master, like that of my dog Shep, but of "the" Master for His subject. Some has rephrased James 4:5, 6 to read, "Do you think that Scripture says without reason that the Holy Spirit, whom God caused to live in us, jealously wants us exclusively to Himself in order to pour out His grace on us generously?"

When we lust, covet, and create strife, we embrace the world's values (Jas 4:1-4), and this stirs up God's jealousy. He continually longs to keep us near to Him. He corrects, rebukes, comforts, guides, and urges us to get to know Him better. This pure possessiveness doesn't stifle or demean us, but uplifts and liberates because it is full of grace and truth. That's why He

wants us all to Himself. Thank God for His jealous Spirit. - Dennis J. De Haan [Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#)

ACTION SUGGESTION- Since we are aware of God's righteous jealousy, what steps should we take so that He can bless us? (James 4:7-10)

**There's no room for double occupancy in the Christian's heart.**

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**Tony Evans** writes that...

Our God is jealous of His work in us (Jas 4:5). He won't share us with another spiritual suitor—and He shouldn't have to!

**John Blanchard** in his book [The Complete Gathered Gold- A Treasury of Quotations](#) (Highly recommended as one of the best resources for Biblically sound quotes) has these quotes...

God is jealous for the good of His redeemed people—but He can never be jealous of anything or anyone. - John Blanchard

The jealousy of God is one of the Christian's greatest challenges—and comforts. - John Blanchard

God, as a jealous God, is filled with a burning desire for our holiness, for our righteousness, for our goodness. - Donald Grey Barnhouse

**John MacArthur's** interpretation of the last half of **James** is somewhat in the minority opinion for he writes that...

This difficult phrase (**The Spirit ... yearns jealously**) is best understood by seeing the “**spirit**” as a reference not to the Holy Spirit, but to the human spirit, and translating the phrase “**yearns jealously**” in the negative sense of “**lusts to envy**.” James’ point is that an unbelieving person’s **spirit** (inner person) is bent on evil (cf. Ge 6:5; 8:21; Pr. 21:10; Eccl 9:3; Jer 17:9; Mk 7:21, 22, 23- note). Those who think otherwise defy the biblical diagnosis of fallen human nature; and those who live in worldly lusts give evidence that their faith is not genuine (cf. Ro 8:5-11- note; 1Co 2:14). ([MacArthur, J.: The MacArthur Study Bible Nashville: Word](#))

**John MacArthur** is not alone in his interpretation, **C H Spurgeon** commenting that...

There is a spirit, resident in the natural man, the human nature of man, which is always inclined toward hate and envy, always wanting to get somewhat from other men, and always grieved if other men seem to be or to have more than the person himself has. How is this spirit to be met? This verse supplies the answer, "He giveth more grace." (Jas 4:6- note) "More grace," -this is the great remedy for hate and envy. "More grace,"-this is the balm for sorrow. "More grace,"-this is our greatest help out of all difficulties. "More grace,"-this is the universal recipe for all that we need: "He giveth more grace."