

Ask Away – November 18

1) What does it mean when it says, “The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy”? (James 4:5 KJV).

There are two main views: 1) James is referring to God’s jealousy for His people—“He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us” (ESV, so also NLT, NRSV, NIV, NASB) and 2) James is referring to the human tendency to be envious—“The spirit that God placed in us is filled with fierce desires” (GNT, so also NET, KJV).¹ I think the first view is best given the immediate context. James has just pointed out that friendship with the world (wanting what it wants and doing what it does) is spiritual *adultery* against God (James 4:4). God wants us to be wholly and unreservedly His, and any flirtation with the ways of the world justly arouses His jealousy.

There is also debate as to the identity of the “Scripture” that James is citing (cf. James 4:5a). Some think James is quoting a lost apocryphal text, but it seems best to understand “Scripture” as not limited to a single verse, but as a reference to the theme found within Scripture that God is jealous for our love and loyalty (e.g., Exod 20:5; 34:14; Zech 8:2).

¹For a thorough discussion of the exegetical issues, see Douglas J. Moo, “The Letter of James,” *Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000) 188–190.