

Doctrinal Summary of
Prayer: Common Reasons for Rejection-Asking Amiss

In James 4:3, James identifies one of the reasons prayer requests are not granted by God.

“You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.”

The words “do not receive” are translated from the Koine Greek words οὐ λαμβάνετε (“ou lam-ban-eh-teh”) which more literally mean, “you all really do not perform the continuous type of action to take hold of something.” It identifies a constant, repetitious failure to receive what is being repeatedly asked for in prayer. The reason given for not taking hold of what has been asked for is that the prayer request is not being asked for properly. Thus, a believer can ask for something good or right and not receive it because he is asking for it from a wrong motivation.

The words “with wrong motives” are translated from the Koine Greek word κακῶς (“kah-kohs”) which more literally means, “in a manner which is inherently worthless as a result of the process or materials by which it was produced.” It describes the manner by which the prayer request has been made, describing that manner as inherently worthless because of the process that produced it. Though James doesn’t explicitly mention the process that produced this rejected request, he does specify the reason why the request was made. From the reason for the request the process can be understood simply as being a fleshly process. Thus, the prayer request was made from the believer’s sinful nature through a fleshly process rather than from the believer’s human spirit through a spiritual process. The desire behind each prayer request matters as well as the fleshly or spiritual source and process from which it was expressed. Asking for something that might be good to ask for, but purely to spend it on one’s own personal enjoyment is a common reason why God might reject the request.

The word “spend” is translated from the Koine Greek word δαπανήσητε (“dah-pah-nae-sae-teh”) which more literally means, “you all might perform the action in a point in time to pay for something using resources in one’s possession.” It identifies dispensing of a resource in order to acquire another object or experience. Here, James identifies that whatever it is that is requested may not be granted by God because the believer intends to use it as a resource to acquire what is personally gratifying to his own pleasure. Asking for what is rightfully the believer’s to ask for does not require God to grant what has been asked if it is purely going to be used as a resource for the believer to acquire personal pleasures.

The word “pleasures” is translated from the Koine Greek word ἡδοναῖς (“hae-do-nais”) which more literally means, “enjoyments derived from experiencing personal or physical gratification, based on response.” It refers to the experience of pleasure that comes from receiving or interacting with something that satisfies the body’s senses or the soul’s desires. The pleasure and enjoyment are based on response to the experience and interaction of the individual with whatever it is that pleases his body or soul. Consequently, the believer can ask for something and not be granted it by God because God knows that the believer will use it to acquire his own personal gratification.

Asking God for something in prayer, even if it is a good thing, can be asked for in the wrong manner and for the wrong purpose. The resources that God has made available to the believer are designed to be used in harmony with God’s purpose and will. When the believer asks for something in order to utilize it for his own selfish pleasures God commonly rejects the request, no matter how often it is requested.