

The Cause of Conflict and Its Cure

James 4:1-3

There was a wordy falling-out between Mrs. Halloran and Mrs. Donohue. As Mrs. Halloran was returning one morning after church Mrs. Donohue spied her. Still smoldering with volcanic fire, she sent a broadside of lava at Mrs. Halloran who heard what was said, flushed, and opened her lips, but suddenly checked herself. After a moment she spoke telling Mrs. Donohue that she had just been to church and was in a state of grace, but the next time they would meet she wouldn't be and would then tell her what she thought of Mrs. Donohue.

Take your Bibles and turn to our text in **James 4:1-3** where the author has a bit to say about the nature of quarrels and fights. As you know, chapters and verses weren't added until much later, so for context, I'd like to start reading at **3:13** because the flow of the letter continues into **chapter 4**.

It happens in families, schools, and businesses. We see it on streets, sporting events and in politics. It occurs between nations and within nations. Social media, grocery stores and even churches are not exempt from them. Even when you're supposed to be having a good time getting away from it all on vacation, it even shows up then. Wherever there are people, it's bound to happen because, as we will see, it's in our nature. You might say it's in our DNA.

At the end of **chapter 3**, James spoke about our need to be peacemakers after telling us that the kind of characteristics bred by worldly wisdom includes bitter envy and selfish ambition. Such "wisdom" comes from the world, is unspiritual, and is of the devil resulting in chaos and every form of evil practice. That, as we will see, is the breeding ground of fights and quarrels.

On the other hand, God's wisdom, which is first pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruits along with being impartial and sincere, leads the believer into peace. That means he or she is doing the best they can at

avoiding conflict while pursuing peacemaking.

That James is bringing up the issue of conflict to these believers indicates that it must have been an issue requiring discussion and admonishment. It also implies that if conflict existed in the church, repentance and reconciliation would be necessary if there was to be peace in the body of Christ. Their efforts at peace in the body would demonstrate to a watching unbelieving world that forgiveness can build unity. On the other hand, the reputation of Christ and the church is damaged when a church preaches love and forgiveness but lives in conflict.

Conflict can happen at any time and under any circumstance where people gather. James words in these three verses are important as we consider both the cause of and cure for conflict.

A woman was interviewing for the position of cook in a home. She was asked by the Mrs. of the house why she was leaving her last place of employment. The job seeker said she couldn't stand the way the master and the Mrs. used to quarrel. Astonished, the interviewer asked if they actually used to quarrel. The job seeker said they did. If the master wasn't arguing with her, the Mrs. was.

Often times when we look back at our own personal conflicts, it's usually over some misunderstanding, some perceived attitude, some thing which in looking back seems so insignificant but at the time and in the heat of the moment, was blown out of proportion. That can happen with countries who go to war. Although Historians try to answer why wars began, at the end of the day, only the people or countries involved really know why it started. But that doesn't stop historians from giving their opinion on the matter. But James knows where it started. He gives us the source of conflict.

I. THE SOURCE OF OUR CONFLICT – v. 1

He begins with a rhetorical question. **“What causes fights and quarrels among you?”**

If you separate Johnny and Billy on the playground after a scuffle around the tetherball pole, they will each blame the other.

If you ask Sally and Bonnie how best friends could become quarrelsome, they will point the finger at each other.

If you sit around a conference table where management and union officials are going at it, they will accuse the other.

If you are negotiating peace between two factions within a government or country, they will say the fault is with the other.

James doesn't give us the luxury of casting blame on anyone else. He isn't going to let us off the hook that easily. He goes right to the source of conflict. But before we look at what he says is the source of conflict, I think it's important to note who James does not identify as the originator of conflict.

As much as we may want to, we can't blame someone else.

He doesn't say it was the fault of the government or management or the employee.

We can't even make the claim that the devil is the culprit as Flip Wilson used to say, "the devil made me do it."

James goes no further than to state that we must each take personal responsibility for fights and quarrels. We are held accountable for conflict.

In **verse 1** we see that James speaks of conflict without and conflict within.

A. Conflict That is Without – v. 1a

In his opening question, James makes it clear that fights and quarrels exist "among you". That's usually how we identify conflict, that at least two or more people are involved. As the saying goes "it takes two to tango."

If you don't want to be involved in a quarrel be like the pastor who was asked how he kept from being involved in them. He said, "by letting the angry person always have the quarrel to himself."

Roman philosopher and statesman, Seneca, once stated, "A quarrel is quickly settled when deserted by one party: there is no battle unless there be two."

The quarrel or fight ends by one person choosing not to participate. How many quarrels would be over before they started if one person just walked away, unwilling to join in?

Before we go any further, let's define a couple words. **What does James mean by the words fights and quarrels?**

In the NIV we have the word fights, while the KJV uses the word wars. From the Greek we get the English word polemic which means disputes, controversy, or arguments. It's a general term for fights or warfare.

The Bible provides us with any number of wars between others.

In **Genesis 13** there was fighting between the herdsmen of Lot and Abraham over pasture.

In **Genesis 37** we have Joseph's brothers against him.

In **II Samuel 13-18** there was a war between Absalom and his father David.

The disciples disputed about who was the greatest.

The Ephesian believers fought.

The Corinthian believers fought.

The Galatian believers fought.

Even within the Philippian church there was fighting between two leading church women.

In **James 1** and again in **chapter 3**, James spoke of church fights over positions in the church and about those who wanted to teach.

In **chapter 2**, he spoke about class wars between the rich and the poor.

In **chapter 5**, he will speak of employment wars because laborers didn't get fair wages.

Folks, you are astute enough to know that it doesn't take much for two people or two nations to be at war with each other. It doesn't have to be weapons, it can be words, or poison pen letters.

The second term used is quarrels or as the KJV says fighting. This is a more narrow term referring to skirmishes or individual attacks. They are personal and can be violent.

Cain's assault on Abel.

Lamech's murder of a man.
Esau toward Jacob.

James talks about conflict between others without, but he also talks about the conflict that is within.

B. Conflict That is Within – v. 1b

Pardon the pun, but this is where James gets to the heart of the matter.

Chuck Swindoll writes, “James is good at rubbing our nose in our own depravity where we need it. We are primarily responsible for our own infighting...we are the ones to blame.”

Yes, Satan is the father of lies.

Yes, Satan was a murderer from the beginning.

Yes, Satan is out to deceive and disrupt.

But James lays it out bare for us to come to the cold, hard reality of the source of our conflict. He forces us to look into the mirror of our soul and realize that conflict comes from within us. **So what is within us that James says causes the conflict?** He says the desires within us cause the battles.

James uses a third Greek word referring to war or battle. The root word refers to an army camp preparing for war. The desires within us are the cause of the battles we face. Desires or lusts comes from the Greek word we get for hedonism or pleasures. It could refer to the pleasure one finds in the enjoyment of a sunset or in reading a good book or watching your grandkids play in the sprinkler, or the desire to be successful. But when these aren't achieved, they can become the source of frustration and the root of the battles within. **Chuck Swindoll adds “when something steps in the way of fulfilling our desires, our tendency is to fight until we get our way.”**

So, while pleasures can have a positive connotation, in the Bible it is generally used in a negative sense speaking of pleasures that are cravings or lustful. That's how our culture generally uses the term. Fulfilling

our every fleshly or sensual desire whether it's lust for sex or power or fame or anything else. In this case, James is saying that what they wanted, they wanted so badly, their own selfish desires caused the conflict.

We don't need to look any further than the mirror of our own soul to see the source of conflict. Paul was good and clear about addressing the battle that is within us.

Romans 7:14-24

John MacArthur states that it is an “Uncontrolled desire to fulfill every passion and whim that promises sensual satisfaction and enjoyment.”

When it comes to the source of our conflicts, we must take personal responsibility, Whether its conflicts without or within, remember what Pastor Don used to say: “our response is our responsibility”.

James continues by not only touching on the source of our conflict, but also the selfishness in our conflict.

II. THE SELFISHNESS IN OUR CONFLICT – vs. 2-3

When desires take hold and control us within, they will result in actions that are wrong.

A. Our Actions Are Wrong – v. 2a

The desire or craving is so strong that when we don't get it we'll do anything to get it. James says we'll kill and covet.

Most commentators don't believe he has in mind actual murder here, although there are examples of someone taking a life in order to get what that other person had. It has a broader meaning here referring to murderous hate or destructive behavior.

I think James had in mind what Jesus taught.

Matthew 5:21-22

Matthew 15:16-19a

In **Genesis 3** we read about Cain's anger toward his brother Abel. Murder was on his heart to strike his hand against his brother.

God asked him about it and told him that if he did what was right, he would be accepted. God further stated that sin was lurking on the door of his heart wanting to master him if he continued to think about it. His desire to be accepted by God was overcome by the desire he had in his heart to do harm to his brother. His actions were wrong and so will ours be if we allow those strong desires to take root and control our thoughts and then our actions. Like Cain, they will master us.

But murder isn't the only thing that's on the heart. So is coveting. The word can also be translated jealous. It comes from the same Greek word for zealot. A zealot is a person who has intense enthusiasm to an extreme or excessive degree. We would call them a fanatic. During Jesus' day, a Jewish zealot belonged to a radical political or religious group bent on overthrowing the Roman government and set Israel free from oppression. Jesus's disciple Simon (not Peter) was one of these zealots.

Being zealous or covetous for what someone else has that you want but can't get creates all kinds of problems. When you can't get what you want, James says it's an attitude that creates conflict, so much so, that the person schemes and plots. The covetous heart takes the person to the place of wishing something bad would happen to the other person. Conflict then becomes the fruit of covetousness. It's okay to be zealous about certain things, but when covetousness enters the heart, our zeal becomes misguided into things like bitterness, anger, resentment and hate. **John Philips describes it as "an appalling picture of human depravity."**

James continues by saying that when our actions are wrong, our asking is wrong.

B. Our Asking Is Wrong – v. 2b-3a

When my heart is not in the right place, when it's led by covetousness, it invariably will lead to asking for the wrong things. Prayers become self-centered and selfish. They focus on what I want instead of what God wants for me. Instead of asking God, I

just go ahead and push to get because it's what I want. I determine what's right for me.

It reminds me of a verse in **Psalm 106**. The psalmist remembers the past sins of Israel and confesses their past unfaithfulness to God. Time after time in the wilderness rather than recall how God had miraculously delivered them from Egypt and His ability to sustain them in the wilderness with food and water, they complained. Rather than trust God, they whined. **Psalm 106:15** offers some sobering words as they continued to press God to give them what they wanted from hearts stirred by rebellion and covetousness. **"So He gave them what they asked for, but sent a wasting disease upon them."** The KJV says He sent **"leanness to their soul."**

Yes, they got what they wanted, but it's like God gave them an emptiness within them that couldn't be satisfied. **Have you ever wanted something so badly, you did everything you could to get it, you even prayed asking God for it, and when you got it, it still left you empty, it didn't satisfy you?** Covetousness wants but leaves your soul empty, even if you get it.

When I had COVID, I lost my sense of taste. After I got my appetite back, but not my taste, I scoured the kitchen looking for something, anything that had flavor. Even though I wasn't hungry, I still kept eating just to find that one thing that would satisfy my taste buds but nothing did except marshmallow peeps.

Now James says two things here. First, he says that we don't have because we don't ask God for it. Maybe we don't ask God for it because we know He's going to say no. It's like the child who wants a snack before dinner, but he doesn't ask his mother because he knows she'll say no, it's too close to supper. So he sneaks after it anyway, but finds that it didn't satisfy anyway or he ate too much and got sick from it. Leanness to the soul.

I think another reason we don't ask is because we want it anyway and we don't

care what God says, we're going to get it no matter what. We don't ask because our covetous heart doesn't want to ask. But when we get it, if we get it, only creates emptiness with a longing to want more or something else. We pursue what we think might satisfy us only to find that our heart becomes colder from coveting. We get to the point of thinking why bother asking God for it.

James says we don't have because we don't ask, but when we do ask, we ask with the wrong motive. We ask amiss. The intent of the word James uses here is to plead or beg with the wrong motive indicating that it is bad, evil or wicked.

L.T. Johnson says "the gift-giving God is here manipulated as a kind of vending machine precisely for self-gratification."

God is not the cosmic genie in the sky where all we have to do is rub the clouds of heaven with prayer and He'll give us what we want.

If we don't get something we are praying for, begin by asking if it's with the right motive. He may be saying no, or not now. But If we persist in prayer asking God for something He doesn't want us to have, that He has clearly said no to, He may give it to us but send leanness to our soul.

Warren Wiersbe writes "When our praying is wrong, our whole Christian life is wrong."

When our actions are wrong and our asking is wrong, our attitudes will be wrong.

C. Our Attitudes Are Wrong – v. 3b

"When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

It's that same word hedonism, the idea of self-indulgence or self-gratification. Your asking is only out of selfishness. The word spend means to be completely used up or to squander. It refers to pleasures that God doesn't honor.

We get a picture of it in **Luke 15** where Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son. After receiving his

inheritance, the prodigal headed out of town to a place as far away as he could get from his father and the kind of life he had known in order to do what he wanted. In **verse 13** we read that he **squandered** all his wealth in wild living. He spent it all doing whatever he wanted living a hedonistic life. He spent it on his own pleasure, but in the end after losing it all, including his dignity cleaning out pig pens, he was destitute. Leanness had come to his soul.

And that's the sense James wants to convey here. When we ask with the wrong motives, we ask for our own selfish pleasure.

James gives us two reasons why our prayers may be unanswered.

The first is that we don't ask.

The second is that we ask with the wrong motive because it's really only about us and our pleasure. Scripture provides us with at least two other reasons prayer may be unanswered.

In **1:6-8**, James says prayer can go unanswered because we lack faith or simply, we **doubt**. We'll address this issue more closely in **chapter 5**.

Another reason prayer may not be answered is because of **disobedience** or sin.

Psalm 66:18

I John 3:21-22

When our prayers are asked with the wrong motive, when sin is not confessed we are drawn into conflict. When there is conflict within, there will certainly be conflict without in our relationships with others. **So what is the solution?**

III. THE SOLUTION TO CONFLICT

Since we discussed this two weeks ago in the message on **James 3:18**, let me just mention that Scripture is clear. When it comes to conflict, the first solution I would suggest is to change our approach by pursuing peace.

A. Change Our Approach – Pursue Peace

Do all we can to be at peace with others instead of conflict. It's not up to the other person, it's our responsibility. **"As far as it depends on me, be at**

peace with others” (Romans 12:18). That puts peacemaking squarely on our shoulders in taking the initiative. By being the peacemaker, we step away from the conflict rather than engage in it.

The second solution I want to suggest is the need to change our desire by pursuing God.

B. Change Our Desire – Pursue God **Psalm 37:4-5**

If our delight, our joy, our satisfaction is in the Lord, we will desire what He wants and not what we want. Rather than being unsatisfied because of something we don't have, or not being satisfied when we get something we shouldn't have, there will be a joy that seeks the well being of others rather than conflict that will otherwise result from that overwhelming sense of frustration from our selfishness. Selfishness from covetousness will diminish the more we place our focus and delight on God.

Do you delight in the Lord?

Do you want what He wants or are you hoping He will want what you want?

That leads to another solution to conflict. It has to do with how and what we pray for.

C. Change Our Prayer – Pursue Intercession

If we listed everything we prayed about, how much of it would be requests for what we wanted? Are we praying for God's will or our will? That will reveal the motive of your heart.

1. Pray for God's will - I John 5:14-15

One day Jesus's disciples Him to teach them to pray. He gave them a model, if you will. In it, He told them to pray for God's will (**Matthew 6:10**).

If we wonder why our prayer may not be answered, it may be because we aren't praying for God's will. We may be praying our will. John says **“if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us – whatever we ask (according to His will) – we know that we have what we asked of Him.”**

That's what Jesus prayed in the garden as He talked about the cup of suffering He was about to take (**Matthew 26:39**) **“Not My will but Thine be done.”**

2. Pray fervently – James 5:16

We'll address this more closely when we get to it, but just let me say that we need to be persistent in prayer. Never think that we only need to pray about something once. For example, Andrew Murray prayed over 50 years for three friends to get saved. Two did before he died and the third shortly after Murray died. Keep at it. Don't give up. God's will is that people not perish (**II Peter 3:9**), so pray fervently.

3. Pray in faith – Matthew 21:22

James 1 spoke about not wavering in prayer, so it stands to reason that faith is required.

Psalm 37:5 “Commit your way to the Lord, trust in Him and He will bring it to pass.” As my parents served at Barakel, they implicitly trusted the Lord to meet their needs and He was faithful to provide. They waited on Him and He never let them down. They believed that if God had led them there to serve, He would be faithful to take care of them and He did.

4. Pray with thanksgiving – Philippians 4:6-7

It's my belief that a thankful heart is not only one that is at peace, but it is also one that is content. They go together. A thankful heart desires what God wants and is satisfied with that.

5. Pray with a pure heart – Psalm 66:18

6. Pray in the name of Jesus – John 14:13-14; 15:16

Can we really invoke the name of Jesus for what we just asked for? If we truly pray in the name of Jesus, we will ask with the right motive and pray for the right things and so diminish the conflict within us.

Conflict is all around us because it begins within us in the heart. It leads to wrong motives in prayer out of selfishness, but we do have a solution. Peace or conflict is your choice.