

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

THE SOURCE OF CONFLICTS

James 4:1-3

By

Steven J. Cole

August 14, 2005

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James Lesson 14

The Source of Conflicts James 4:1-3

A Canadian pastor told a true story of how a new denomination got started in that country. It all started the night that a Mr. Horner was enthusiastically preaching when his tie became wrapped around his hand. He concluded that the devil was trying to bind him in his preaching. So he tore off his tie, threw it on the ground, stomped on it, and said that ties were from the devil.

From then on he taught that Christians ought never to wear ties, because they bound them in their Christian lives. Others disagreed, which led to quarrels, which led to division. Today in Canada, there is a tie-less group called the "Hornerites."

While I would sign a petition to ban neckties—I call them "strangulation devices"—I find it tragic that Christians would quarrel over such a trivial matter. Sometimes, when serious doctrinal issues are at stake, division among professing Christians is demanded. If we compromise the gospel, we are no longer Christian in any meaningful sense of the word. But, sadly, all too often our divisions and quarrels are over petty matters, not essentials.

What is true among churches is also true in our homes. Many Christian homes are wracked by conflict rather than permeated with the sweet aroma of the peace of Christ. I just read of a man who is serving the Lord in Africa. He grew up in a legalistic pastor's home that majored on minor issues and overlooked major issues, such as love, compassion, understanding, and forgiveness. When he called his parents to wish them a happy thirtieth anniversary, he learned that they were getting a divorce. He had to overcome a lot of bitterness in his own life to be able to follow and serve Christ.

Sometimes we idealize the early church. We think, "It must have been great to be a part of the first century church! It was so dynamic and powerful. They had such sweet fellowship!" But the reality is, the early church was made up of people, and people haven't changed over the centuries! Many (if not all!) first century

churches wrestled with conflicts between the members. The Corinthian church had divided into factions. The Philippian church had two women who couldn't get along, and the conflict was severe enough that Paul singled them out by name in his letter. The Galatian believers were biting and devouring one another (Gal. 5:15). Paul began the practical section of Ephesians with an appeal to unity, tolerance, and love between the members (Eph. 4:1-16). On a personal level, even Paul and Barnabas had a serious disagreement that led to a parting of ways (Acts 15:36-40).

So it was not a unique situation when James addressed the problem of quarrels and conflicts among the believers to whom he wrote. The section here runs through 4:12, and it applies to all of our relational conflicts, whether in the church or at home. For sake of time, we can only deal with verses 1-3 today, but here is the flow of the entire section. The overall idea may be summed up: To resolve conflicts, repent of your sinful selfishness and humble yourself before God. There are four sections:

1. To resolve conflicts, judge your selfish motives (4:1-3).
2. To resolve conflicts, turn away from the world, give total allegiance to God, and humbly seek His grace (4:4-6).
3. To resolve conflicts, submit to God, resist the devil, and in God's presence repent of all your sins (4:7-10).
4. To resolve conflicts, stop judging others and submit to God's Word (4:11-12).

Today, we can only look at the first section, where James says,

To resolve conflicts, judge your selfish motives.

If it seems that I am stomping on your toes, it is only because James stomps on all of our toes! He is not a nice, polite man who beats around the bush in a mealy-mouthed manner! He is a doctor of the soul who speaks the truth plainly, even when it hurts. But you should prefer a doctor who speaks the truth over one who is nice, but never tells you what is wrong. If you will heed James' straightforward analysis, your relationships will improve dramatically! We can track his thinking with four points:

1. Self versus self is at the heart of all relational conflicts.

James asks (4:1), "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?" The Greek reads literally, "From where wars and

from where fights among you?" "Wars" may sound a bit extreme to describe the squabbles in your relationships, but James' point is that if you do not deal with minor squabbles, they can easily escalate into all-out wars.

This has proved true in world history. In 1249, a soldier serving in the army of the city of Bologna, Italy, deserted to Modena and took with him an old oaken bucket used as a water trough for army horses. Bologna waived her rights to the fugitive, but demanded the return of the bucket. Proud Modena refused and a twenty-two-year conflict ensued (*Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations*, Paul Lee Tan [Assurance Publishers], #71166). Although the underlying causes of World War I were much more complex, the immediate cause was the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand on June 28, 1914. Eventually 32 nations joined that war and about 30 million lives were lost.

James answers his own question as to the source of wars and fights (4:1, 2): "Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel." James' point is, don't look elsewhere for the source of your conflicts. Look within! The source is selfishness! Two selfish people dig in their heels and accuse each other as being the cause of the problems. Often, others take sides, until an all-out war results. But James takes it back to the root cause: *selfishness!*

Many of you that are currently engaged in conflict are thinking, "That's a bit simplistic! If you knew the circumstances of the conflict that I'm in, you'd see that it's much more complex than that. Let me explain what my wife [husband, etc.] does and you will see that this conflict is not my fault."

When a couple comes to see me because of conflict in their marriage, the most difficult thing for me to do is to get each partner to stop blaming the other partner and to take responsibility for his or her side of the conflict. I've listened to couples attack each other. I stop them and say, "I don't want to hear any more accusations against each other. Okay?" They grudgingly agree, but I kid you not, within minutes, if not seconds, they are blaming each other again!

James is saying that you will not resolve conflict until you correctly identify the source of it. If you blame the other person, you have not yet correctly identified the source. You must look within and see that your own selfishness is at fault. As a pastoral counselor, I have never seen a conflict that is 100 percent one-sided. Never! Even if one party is only 10 percent responsible and the other side 90 percent, the 10 percent side needs to face his or her responsibility and stop blaming the other side. Let God convict and deal with your partner. You deal with your own selfish sin.

The story is told of two monks who had lived in harmony for years. One day one of the monks grew bored with the monotony of their routine, so he said, "Let's do something different. Let's do as the world does."

His fellow monk had been out of the world so long that he had forgotten, so he asked, "What does the world do?"

"Well, for one thing, the world quarrels."

His brother monk asked, "How does the world quarrel?"

The other replied, "See that stone? Place it between us and say, 'The stone is mine!'" Wanting to accommodate his friend, he put the stone between them and said, "The stone is mine!"

The monk who suggested the quarrel paused for reflection and felt the compulsion of their years of friendship. So he said, "Very well, brother. If the stone is thine, keep it." And so ended the quarrel (*ibid.*, # 4867).

So James' first point is that self versus self is at the heart of all relational conflicts. The first step toward resolving conflict is to acknowledge your own selfishness.

2. The enemy dwells within us and is engaged in mortal combat.

The main enemy isn't the other person! The main enemy is your own sinful, selfish flesh. If you do not defeat it, it will destroy you! James says (4:1), "Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members" These words imply three things:

A. The enemy dwells within your heart.

There are some who teach that because we are new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) and because we died with Him (Rom. 6), we do not have an old sin nature. They usually admit that we still must do battle with “the flesh,” but they deny that we have two natures. I find this confusing at best; at worst, they end up minimizing the power of the enemy within. Minimizing or underestimating the power of an enemy is a sure path toward defeat!

When James says that these pleasures are “in your members,” he means, “in your body.” The body itself is not sinful, but as long as we live in these bodies, we must do battle with sin. We will not be completely free from indwelling sin until we receive our new resurrection bodies at the return of Jesus Christ. Of course, at death our spirits are freed from the power of sin (there could not be any sin in heaven!), but our redemption is not complete until we get our resurrection bodies. Until that time, there is within each of us a powerful inclination toward sin.

R. V. G. Tasker (*The General Epistle of James, Tyndale NT Commentaries* [Eerdmans], p. 85) writes,

What he asserts is that the human personality has, as it were, been invaded by an alien army which is always campaigning within it. The verb [“wage war”] implies that these pleasures are permanently on active service; and the expression *in your members* means that there is no part of the human frame which does not afford them a battleground. Human nature is indeed in the grip of an overwhelming army of occupation.

The point is, unless you recognize the magnitude of this battle and the frightening fact that the enemy is not overseas and not on the other side of the country, but living within your body, you don’t understand how serious your problem is! You will never defeat such a powerful enemy if you shrug it off as no big deal.

B. The enemy poses as a friendly ally, but never delivers on his promises.

James calls this enemy “your pleasures” (4:1, 3). We get the word *hedonism* from this Greek word. It implies that the enemy poses as a friendly ally, someone who will help you enjoy life better. He whispers, “Follow me, and I’ll give you the pleasure you’ve been missing.” And, if you follow the path of “your pleasures,” at

first life will seem very good! They deliver on their promise. But it's like using drugs. At first, you feel high and your problems seem to be gone. But then you get hooked, the highs don't feel so high any more, and you end up being destroyed. This week I heard a report on NPR about the increasing cases of "meth mouth." Methamphetamines literally rot the teeth out of users' mouths. But even though they are destroying themselves, they keep using it because of the immediate high it gives them. All sin is like that—it gives immediate pleasure, but long term pain.

James emphasizes four times in these three verses that yielding to your sinful pleasures does *not* get you what you thought it would. He says (4:2, 3a, italics added), "You lust and *do not have*, ... You are envious and *cannot obtain*, ... *You do not have* because you do not ask. You ask and *do not receive*" Sin always makes enticing promises, and in the short run, it seems to deliver. But over the long haul, you come up empty and frustrated, if not totally destroyed. The bottom line of seeking your own way is always, "you do not have."

C. The enemy's objective is to bring us down.

The objective in war is either to destroy or to totally dominate your enemy. Scholars differ over what James means when he accuses his readers of committing murder. Did he mean this literally? Probably not. It is more likely that James has in mind what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:21-22), that if you are angry with your brother, you have murdered him in God's sight.

But we should not miss the implication that murder usually begins with unchecked anger. Even though we may think, "I would never murder anyone," if you don't deal with your sinful anger, it could lead there! You may think, "I would never physically abuse my wife or my children." Nice thought, and I hope you're right. But if you continually erupt in anger toward them, it may happen! You must confront the enemy within, because he does not want to stop short of destroying you and others through you. And, you cannot grow in your Christian life and you will not bear fruit for God if you engage in unchecked anger and conflict at home or in the church. "The anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (James 1:20).

So James says that self versus self is at the heart of all relational conflicts. Also, there is an enemy within each of us, engaged in mortal combat. He poses as a friend promising pleasure, but his end is death.

3. Your prayer life (or lack thereof) reveals the focus of your heart.

James (4:2b-3) says, "You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." There are three implications here:

A. If you do not pray, it shows that your focus is not properly toward God.

The focus of the person who does not pray is toward self, not toward God. So often when we're in a relational conflict, we scheme, we tell our friends our side of the story, we go for counseling, we read self-help books on how to deal with difficult people—but we don't make the problem a matter of faithful prayer. Maybe one reason that we fail to pray is that it's hard to pray for someone and be angry at them at the same time. Since we justify our anger ("I have a right to be angry") and we want to use our anger to make the other person pay, we don't want to let it go. So we don't pray for him (or her). I'm not referring to praying the imprecatory psalms against him, but really praying for his wellbeing!

Maybe you're thinking, "But I *do* pray for him. I pray that he will deal with his wrong attitude or just get out of my life so that I don't have these constant hassles!" James continues,

B. If you pray selfishly, it shows that you are trying to use God for *your* purposes, rather than seeking *His* purposes.

James says (4:3), "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." That's selfish praying! That's trying to use God as Aladdin's Genie, to pull Him off the shelf when you need Him, rub Him the right way, and then put Him back until the next time. But Jesus clearly taught that prayer is not to get our will done on earth, but to get God's will done: "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Prayer is not so that we can use God; it is so that God can use us.

Most of you have seen the Four Spiritual Laws booklet, with the diagram of the throne with either Christ or self on the throne. The point of the diagram, of course, is that you are not to be the lord of your life. Jesus alone deserves that place. And yet I find so many who profess to be Christians, but they are trying to use God to make self happy. That is to be firmly on the throne of your life!

So James is saying that if you do not pray, it shows that your focus is not properly God-ward. If you pray selfishly, it shows that you are trying to use God for your purposes, rather than seeking to fulfill His purposes. There's a third implication:

C. To receive from God, ask with the proper motives.

Jesus plainly taught (Matt. 7:7), "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." He did not say, "Ask and it will be given to you *instantly*." He may have good reasons to delay the answer. Often the delays strengthen and test our faith. He knows the right timing as to when to answer. But our responsibility is to ask, but to ask with the right motives.

Your main reason for asking God to bring peace into your home or into some difficult relationship should not be so that you are free from the hassle. I know, you're weary of the hassle. Peace would feel so good! But, if you pray for peace so that you can be relieved of the stress, you're missing the big picture. The main reason you should pray for peace is so that God might be glorified. He is not glorified by strife and quarreling. Christ is not magnified by constant conflict. He is glorified in His people when they crucify self and allow His love to flow through them, even toward those who treat them wrongly. Ask God to be glorified in your relationships, and He will answer! So,

4. The first step to resolve conflicts with others is to judge your own selfish focus.

Whether in the church or in your home, if you do not judge and put to death your sinful, selfish desires, you will have war. Or, to reverse it, if a church or home is filled with conflict, it is because some (if not all) of the members are living in the flesh. William Barclay put it this way (*The Letters of James and Peter, Daily Study Bible* [Westminster Press], p. 99), "The ultimate choice in life lies between pleasing oneself and pleasing God; and a world in which

men's first aim is to please themselves is a battleground of savagery and division."

The decision to judge your own selfish focus is not optional for believers. It is the sine qua non of following Jesus Christ. He said (Luke 9:23), "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me." It is a daily requirement to put self to death! Why would you want to do that? Jesus continues (9:24), "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it." So it really isn't a choice between pleasing oneself or pleasing God. When you live to please God by denying self, you gain your life—truly abundant life!

Conclusion

A boy once asked, "Dad, how do wars begin?" "Well, take the First World War," said his father. "That got started when Germany invaded Belgium." Immediately his wife interrupted, "Tell the boy the truth. It began because somebody was murdered."

The husband drew himself up in an air of superiority and snapped back, "Are you answering the question, or am I?" Turning her back on him in a huff, the wife walked out of the room and slammed the door as hard as she could. When the dishes stopped rattling in the cupboard, an uneasy silence followed, broken at length by the son. "Daddy, you don't have to tell me any more; I know now!"

"What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?" (James 4:1). The way to resolve conflict with others is not to win the war with others. Rather, it is to wage war against those powerful forces that are waging war in your soul! Judge your selfish motives, daily put self on the cross, and you will move in the direction of peace in your relationships.

Application Questions

1. Suppose that you try to judge your own selfishness, but you live with a very self-centered person. What should you do?
2. Both sin (Heb. 11:25) and God promise pleasure (Ps. 16:11). Should we seek pleasure or seek God? Is there a difference?
3. Is it always wrong to pray for our own desires? How can we know whether our desires line up with God's desires?
4. Are all conflicts wrong? If not, when and how can we know that we are fighting for the right cause, not for sinful reasons?

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