

Conflict: Its Cause And Cure

James 4:1-10

Pastor John Miller

I want to read one verse, James 4:1, to get us started. James says, “Where do wars and fights come from among you?” He opens with the first two questions. “Do they not come from your desires for pleasure...”—that’s a key word—“...that war in your members?”

Someone said,

“To deal above with the saints in love,

That will be glory.

But to live below with some saints I know,

Brother, that’s another story!”

If you’ve been in the church very long, you know that sometimes Christians just don’t get along. Someone likened the church to Noah’s ark. They said that if it wasn’t for the storm on the outside, you couldn’t stand the stench on the inside.

But I love the church. It’s His bride and it’s through the church where God is working in the world today. But we, as Christians, don’t seem to get along sometimes. The reason is, in context, that we follow the wisdom of the world, which is “earthly, sensual, demonic.”

So James is still dealing, in context, with the wisdom from above, which is “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.” Then there is the wisdom that comes from the world, which is “earthly, sensual, demonic.” What realm are you functioning in?

Now in James 4, he will talk about conflict: its cause and cure. And there are two rhetorical questions that James asks in verse 1. “Where do wars and fights come from among you?” The word “wars” speaks of “chronic hostility.” It’s a constant state of fighting. And “fights” in the Greek means “battles” or “individual fights.” So it means if we have a war going on, we are at war with others, and we have battles that just pop up.

Some of you say, “Pastor John, you’re describing my marriage!” As the old saying goes, “If the shoe fits, wear it.” If there is war or battles in your marriage, if there is war in your home, James isn’t dealing specifically with that in this text. He’s also not talking about international wars. It does apply to them; we know the source of fighting and wars. But here he is dealing with believers not getting along in the church. He is talking about individual wars in the church between believers.

It's sad to realize that James isn't talking to non-Christians but to Christians about the wars and fights they have in the church. So the problem is as old as Cain and Abel. No sooner had Adam and Eve sinned, then they have one son murder another son. And domestic violence continues to increase in our nation today. It's sad that we can't get along with one another in our homes, in our churches, in our nation and in the world.

James does two main things. He first gives us the cause of our conflicts, in verses 1-5, and second, he gives us the cure for our conflicts, in verses 6-10. He tells us what causes conflicts and what cures conflicts.

Let's first look at the cause of conflicts, verses 1-5. "Where do wars..."—the "chronic hostility"—"...and fights..."—the "individual battles"—"...come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?" Now remember James is addressing believers. "You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask." That means you don't pray. But when you do pray, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend..."—or "lover"—"...of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, 'The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously'?"

As far as what the causes of conflict are, strictly speaking, there are two, in the text. But I'll give you three as I wrap up this section. The first cause is hedonism or hedonistic philosophy, and the second cause is lust or worldliness.

First, we'll see hedonism, in verses 1-3. Notice in verse 1, James uses the word "desires" or "lusts," in the King James; in verse 2, he uses the word "lust"; and in verse 3, he uses the word "pleasures" or "lusts." The word "lust" is a neutral term, which can either be good or bad. It also means "desire." How we see it in the Greek here is "desire for pleasure." So you can desire the pleasure of God, which is a good lust. "O God...My soul thirsts for You," Psalm 63:1. "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God," Psalm 42:1. A desire for God is right.

But also in this context, and as generally the New Testament denotes, it means an evil lust, a sinful, sensual, evil lust that comes from our sinful nature. In James 4:1, he says it comes from "your members." That's speaking of your carnal, sinful nature rather than coming from a desire to know God and to seek Him.

The Greek word for "lust," in verses 1, 2 and 3, is "hédoné." This is where we get the philosophy of hedonism. It's the philosophy that pleasure is the most important pursuit of life. You abandon every other pursuit, and all you do is live for pleasure. And in the hedonic philosophy, it's the pursuit of carnal please and the avoidance of pain. Hedonism says that the chief end of man is the gratification of self, of your own lusts, and not the glorification of God. It's the Playboy philosophy. "If it feels good, do it."

But as Christians, we are to seek our pleasure in God and not in the love and friendship of the world. The Christian says, "I'll set aside my carnal, sinful desires to honor God and to glorify God and to seek God." In doing that, we find pleasure. The purpose and plan of life is not to follow after pleasure; it's knowing and following God, who brings us the greatest pleasure of all.

In what's called The Westminster Catechism, it asserts that "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to glorify Him forever." So there is pleasure for the Christian. There is joy in knowing Jesus, but pleasure is the by-product of seeking God and knowing God. Pleasure shouldn't come from outside of God or from a love of the world. If you seek pleasure directly from the world, you won't find it. If you seek God, pleasure will be the by-product.

The Bible says, "Delight yourself also in the Lord..."—that's seeking and delighting in God—"...and He shall give you the desires of your heart." That means He'll place on your heart God-given desires. He won't give you earthly, worldly, carnal pleasures; but He'll give you the pleasure of knowing Him, the One who created you for His glory and for His pleasure.

So if you're not finding what you're looking for, you're looking for the wrong thing. If you're saying, "I'm not finding pleasure in my marriage, so I want to find someone else to replace my wife[/husband]," you'll never find pleasure.

If you're finding pleasure in the things of this world, they will only bring temporary pleasure. The only lasting pleasure is the pleasure that comes from knowing and following God. How important that is!

Now notice in verse 2, James says, "You lust." You have this hedonistic desire. Again, how revealing to think that he's talking to Christians. How shameful. Let's be honest with ourselves. "Am I a Christian who has become hedonistic in my philosophy? Have I forgotten my pleasure, my joy, my delight is in the Lord? That whatever happens, God brings me great joy?"

James says, "You lust and do not have." You have desires, but they're not being satisfied, because they're not set on God. "You murder and covet and cannot obtain." It's futile. "You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask." Prayerlessness.

So here we have selfishness and then we have prayerlessness. You're not seeking God, you're not talking to God, you're not praying to God, you're not finding your delight in God. You're finding your delight in hedonistic, carnal pleasures. "You do not have because you do not ask."

If you're empty and not finding pleasure in earthly pursuits, stop and pray. Turn toward God. Like a compass that always points north, the Christian's heart should always be pointing toward God. It should always be thirsting for God. If you're a true child of God, but you haven't read your Bible lately, your heart's going to be yearning for God. If you haven't been in church lately, then your heart should be yearning to be with the saints of God, to worship in the congregation of the Lord and to sense the presence of God.

Have you ever been away from fellowship with other believers and from the Bible for any length

of time? You feel you want to be in church, you want to be with God's people and you want to be in God's Word. You want to spend time alone with God. You want God's touch upon your life. You want to experience Him. "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God," Psalm 42:1.

But the problem is that we become hedonistic in our pursuit, and we miss the pleasures that God wants us to have. And we don't pray. So verse 2, "You do not have because you do not ask."

If you're in a marriage relationship and you're struggling, let me give you a tip. It's hard when you're angry, mad and there's conflict. Just sit down and pray together. If you can't resolve a conflict, if you can't resolve an argument, say, "Let's just pray." And don't pray that God would smite your husband/wife. But open your heart and pray, "God, forgive me for my anger, my bitterness and for fighting and arguing."

And as you bear your soul, it's like having God at the top, and as you pray together, the closer you draw near to God, the gap between you and your spouse narrows. You draw closer to one another. Many conflicts can be resolved if you would both pray together. "Let's pray together and ask the Lord to be our helper and our strengthener and our wisdom." You both seek the Lord. So the danger is that our selfishness leads to prayerlessness.

But some would say, verse 3, "I do ask, but God doesn't answer my prayer!" So James says, "You ask, and do not receive." So at the end of verse 2, they don't even ask. Then there are those objectors who say, "Well, we pray!" Do you ever hear someone say that?

In counseling, we say, "You need to pray."

"I did pray! I prayed that God would smite my husband!" "I did pray, but God didn't answer!" "I did pray, but God didn't give me what I want!"

Look at verse 3. This is one of the clearest statements in the Bible why God does not answer prayer. You ask but "you ask amiss." That conveys the idea that you're asking for the wrong reason; the motive in your prayer is not for the glory of God but rather for the gratification of selfish desires. It says, "You ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures."

So either you don't pray, or you do pray, and God doesn't answer because it's a selfish prayer. As an example, you pray for a new speed boat. And it has to have blue metal-flake with tuck-'n-roll interior. You say, "I promise, God, that if you give me that speed boat, I'll take the youth group skiing!" Aren't you glad that God doesn't give us everything we ask for?

Have you ever thanked God for unanswered prayers? I have. It takes getting older and looking back at all the times God said "No" that you can say, "Thank you, Lord, for sparing me and not giving me what I want."

Sometimes we think that if we really want something in prayer that we have to pray with

emotional fervor. Why O why do Christians get so weird when they pray?! Who talks like that? Slap that dude! Yes, ask. But ask in the name of Jesus. When you ask in Jesus's name, it means for His sake, for His glory. And it means you're coming in His merit. So when you pray and you don't want to ask amiss, ask yourself, "Will this glorify Christ? Is it for Christ's sake? Is it really praying in Jesus' name and in His authority?"

Sadly Christians forget God and don't pray, and when they do pray, they pray amiss. They only want to get something to consume on their own lust. The results of this are conflict. So tragic. Does your prayer life reveal a hedonistic heart?

The second cause of conflict is not only because we are hedonistic in our prayers and in our life pursuits, but also because we are worldly, verses 4-5. This is one of the classic passages on worldliness. "Adulterers and adulteresses!" Now in the best Greek manuscripts, the word "adulterers" does not appear; it's only the word "adulteresses," the feminine form. "Do you not know that friendship with the world..."—this is the love of the world—"...is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."

Why does it say "adulteresses"? By the way, this is not talking about physical, literal adultery. The breaking of the Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery," means if you are married and have sexual relations with someone else. But here James is talking about spiritual adultery.

In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel had God as their husband. So when they worshipped other gods, they were an adulterous nation. Now as Christians in the New Testament, we are the bride of Christ. He is our heavenly bridegroom. So when we worship other gods, other things or have a divided heart, we find that we are spiritually committing adultery. And God is a jealous God and wants our devotion and love. So we are not to be "adulteresses."

The phrase "friendship with the world" is interesting, in verse 4. The word "friendship" comes from "philos." Philadelphia means "brotherly love." "Phileo" is a love of the things of this world, a physical kind of love. So "friendship" is a love of this world. You can't love the world and love God at the same time. The Bible says, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other." You must love God solely and exclusively. If you "philos," if you love the world, you become an enemy of God.

The word "world" is the word "cosmos" and is not talking about the physical universe here; it is talking about the evil world's system apart from God. It's talking about "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life." This is what we mean by "worldliness." So if we love the world, we have a "worldly" heart.

Christians divide over the standards we should live by that are not Biblical, where there is Christian liberty. But worldliness is a matter of the heart. I like what John Wesley once said, in defining worldliness. He said, "Whatever cools my affection for God is worldly." If it dims my vision of God, it's worldly.

Ask yourself, “Have I fallen in love with the evil world’s system so that I’ve become an enemy of God?” Matthew 6:24 says, “You cannot serve God and mammon.” You can’t serve two masters. So we become friends of the world and enemies of God. We become “adulteresses”; we become friends with the world and conformed to the world and condemned with the world. Verse 4 says that we become enemies of God.

Verse 5, “Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, ‘The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously’?” Not only are we enemies of God, but He is also becoming jealous of us. This verse is a challenge to translate. The English Standard Version translates it as, “He yearns jealously over the Spirit that He has made to dwell in us.” Another translation says, “The Spirit which He has made to dwell in us jealously desires us.” Putting it in my words, verse 5 says, “The Spirit of God longs for us to love God and to worship God exclusively.” This is what’s talked about in the Bible as “the jealousy of God.”

We always associate the word “jealousy” with a sinful activity or attitude. That’s not right. It is right and righteous for God to be jealous over you. He made you, He redeemed you, He loves you and He wants your love and affection.

It’s no different than in a marriage relationship. It’s right for me to be jealous over my wife; I want her exclusive love. And she wants my exclusive love. No rival there, nobody else taking our place.

And God also has a wholesome, righteous jealousy over us. He loves us and wants our love, affection and devotion. So in verses 4-5, God is really warning us about worldliness. He yearns jealously over us, because He cares for us, just as we do over each other in a marriage relationship.

In the sower-and-the-seed parable of Matthew 13, there was the seed that was planted that brought forth fruit, but the weeds choked the fruit, so it became unfruitful. “The cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word,” so it becomes unfruitful. This leads to conflict, and we’re not right with God and others.

So three things: selfishness, prayerlessness and it leads to worldliness and brings conflict. The more you seek the Lord, the more you draw near to God, we’ll see that the less conflict you’ll have in your heart and in your relationship with others.

We’ve discussed the causes of conflict. Now let’s look at the cure for conflict, in verses 6-10. “But He gives more grace.” That is a marvelous statement. The cure for conflict is the grace of God. “Therefore He says: ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’”

Now here are the five commands, which we’ll come back to. This is like a commander of a regiment barking out commands. “Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners...”—he’s talking to Christians—“...and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” In John Bunyan’s spiritual allegory, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian met a man named Facing Both Ways.

We shouldn't be like that, double-minded.

Verse 9, "Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom." How's that for a verse in the Bible? "Be miserable" is what it literally says. "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He..."—or "the Lord"—"...will lift you up."

I want to summarize the cure for conflicts in one statement, and then I'll break it down. The summary is in verse 6: God's greater grace. "He gives more grace." Why didn't James say, "He gives grace"? Why did he say "more grace"? The phrase "more grace" means "grace upon grace." Some translations have "greater grace." It means "continual, overflowing, abundant grace."

Now this is not saving grace. This is sustaining grace. It's living grace. It's an enabling, overflowing grace to help us live in a fallen world. More and more every day I realize that I need God's sustaining grace to live. He saved me by His grace. "Don't let me go, Lord. Sustain me by Your grace. And one day take me to glory by Your grace."

It's hard to live for God in a sinful, fallen world. Where God provides His help, it's called "more grace." It's not just grace; it's grace upon grace upon grace. John 1:16 says, "Of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace." It's the same concept of overflowing grace. And in Romans 5:20, Paul says, "Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more." Where there is abundant sin, there is abundant grace.

So God's all-sufficient, sustaining grace is provided. For daily need, we have daily grace. For sudden need, we have sudden grace. For overwhelming need, we have God's overwhelming grace.

I heard of an artist who painted a picture of Niagara Falls. I would love to experience standing near Niagara Falls and seeing all that water pour over the falls. The artist painted his picture of the falls, took it to an art gallery and left it there for display. But the gallery director noticed that it didn't have a title and couldn't get in touch with the artist. So the director gave his own title to the painting: More to Follow.

What a picture of God's grace: more to follow. Just when you think you've depleted it, just when you think you've exhausted it, just when you think it's run out, there's always more to follow. So whatever you need today, God's grace is sufficient.

I like 2 Corinthians 12, where it talks about Paul having a thorn in his flesh. Paul asked God three times to have the thorn in his side removed. Have you ever had a physical infirmity and asked God to take it away? But God said, "No"? It happens all the time. I know what that's like.

Paul said, "God, would you take away this thorn in my flesh? This 'messenger of Satan to buffet me'?" Paul asked God three times. And three times God said, "No, no, no." But He told Paul that He wouldn't take away the thorn in his flesh; but He said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." And Paul responded, "Therefore most gladly

I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me....For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

My weakness drives me to that overflowing supply of God’s grace. His grace is sufficient for everything I need. You need grace in your marriage? God has that grace. You need grace in the physical infirmities of your body? God gives you grace. You have financial difficulties? God gives you grace. God’s grace is sufficient.

But do we tap into that “greater grace”? How do we do that? It’s for the humble who seek the Lord. “What steps should I take to experience God’s ‘greater grace’ resulting in contentment rather than conflict?”

There are five commands or imperatives in the text. They are not options or suggestions but actual commands. A few come with promises attached. These five commands are interrelated and interlocking. The first command is, “Submit to God,” verse 7. If I’m going to experience God’s grace, I must be submitted to God. The word “submit” means “to get back in rank.” It’s actually a military word. It means to get back in line, get yourself in submission. Satan said, “I will” but Jesus said, “Thy will be done.” He submitted to the will and plan of God the Father. There is nothing more important that will lead to pleasure in God and the lack of conflict than to seek God’s will by submitting yourself.

I like the old hymn, I Surrender All.

“I surrender all.

I surrender all.

All to Thee my blessed Savior,

I surrender all.”

If you pray that as you sing it, your life will be transformed. One of the reasons why you’ve got conflict in your life right now is that you haven’t surrendered all. Is your all on the altar of sacrifice? Have you yielded your whole life to God? Get in step. Submit yourself.

The second command, in verse 7, is to resist the devil. And you can’t be submitting yourself to God without resisting the devil. And drawing near to God means saying “No” to the devil. “Resist the devil...”—that’s the command—“...and he will flee from you.” “Devil” means “philanderer.” When you resist him, you’ll see his back.

You say, “Well, the devil’s heckling me!”

Then resist him. Don’t welcome him. Don’t open the door and invite him to come in and hang out with you! Say “No” to him. Resist him. We must take action. Ephesians 6:11-18: “Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.” Gird your

“waist with truth...put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the Gospel of peace...taking the shield of faith...take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit.” Resist and stand against the devil, and His promise is that he will flee from you.

The third command, in verse 8, is to draw near to God. In other words, you can't submit unless you resist the devil, and the way to resist the devil is to by drawing near to God. You can't rightfully resist the devil without drawing near to God. “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”

In Psalm 73:28, Asaph had gotten his eyes off God and began to love the world and other things. He finally went to the house of God, got his perspective on eternity correct and said, “It is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord God.”

And notice what God does when you draw near to Him: He draws near to you. If you feel far from God, guess who's moved? Not God. You. God's waiting and longing for you to come back to Him.

What a beautiful picture of this in the parable of the prodigal son. As soon as the father saw his son returning down the road, the father ran to him. This is a picture of God running to us. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” And He will run to you and embrace you. The father smothered the son with kisses, put a ring on his finger, a robe around him, shoes on his feet, killed the fatted calf and began to make merry, because His son had come home.

Now how do we draw near to God? Look at verse 8. “Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” “Hands” would indicate our actions or what we do. “Hearts” would indicate our attitudes or how we think and feel. “God looks at the heart,” which is the attitude that leads to the action.

So if I'm going to draw near to God, I must repent of my sins, cleans my hands and my heart and no longer be “double-minded” or facing both ways.

Command number four, verse 9, is to be miserable. Yes, that's right—miserable. “Lament...”—or “Be afflicted”—“...and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.” In the Greek, “be afflicted” means “Be miserable.” Can you imagine preaching a whole sermon on that verse? “Thank you for coming to church today. Be miserable! Weep and mourn.” But that's what the Bible says here.

If there is sin in your life, it's time to weep. If there is unrepentant sin in your life, it's time to mourn. Again, you cannot find pleasure in the sinful things of this world. You can only find pleasure in God. And you cannot find God without clean hands and a clean heart.

In Psalm 51:17 David said, after committing the horrible sin and transgression with Bathsheba and had her husband, Uriah murdered, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and

a contrite heart—O God you will not despise.”

I’m all for joy and celebration in the Christian life, but there is also a time to weep. Jesus said in His Beatitudes in Matthew 5:4, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” The word “blessed” means “O how happy and to be envied” are those who mourn over their sin and seek God.

The sweetest joys in life are the fruit of sorrows. “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning,” Psalm 30:5. Maybe your soul needs to be washed with tears of repentance.

Jesus also said in Luke 6:25, “Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.” Rather “Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy, Psalm 126:5.

And command number five, in verse 10, is be humble. “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.” So in God’s kingdom, the way up is first down. In the world, the way up is to fight your way to the top, stepping on others. In God’s kingdom, it’s to be humble, so God “will lift you up.” What a summary verse this is. As a universal law of God, the way up is down, in God’s economy. The gravity of God’s grace always flows to the humble.

Again, in verse 6, “He gives more grace.” But “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” And in verse 10, “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.”

Are you submitted to God? Are you resisting the devil? Are you drawing near to God? Are you weeping and mourning over your sin? Have you humbled yourself under the mighty hand of God? If you haven’t, do these steps, beloved, to cure conflict, fights and wars.

Years ago I was given my mother’s Bible. Shortly after that, she died and went to heaven, so I cherish her Bible. And in the Bible I found this poem, by Annie Johnson Flint, written in my mother’s own handwriting.

“He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,

He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;

To added afflictions, He addeth His mercy,

To multiplied trials, He multiplied peace.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,

When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,

When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,

Our Father's full giving is only begun.

His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,

His power no boundary known unto men;

For out of His infinite riches in Jesus

He giveth and giveth and giveth again."