

The Epistle of James

Lesson # 12

The Wars Within Us

James 4:1-6

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"It was the right hook that got him. Pastor Waite might have stood in front of the Communion table trading punches with head deacon Ray Bryson all morning, had not Ray's fist caught him on the chin two minutes and fifteen seconds into the fight. Waite went down for the count at the altar where most members of Emmanuel Baptist had first declared their commitment to Christ.

Within an instant the majority of the congregation converged on the Communion table, punching or shoving...The melee soon spilled over to an open space beside the organ...Mary Dahl, the director of Dorcas Society, threw a hymnal...the missile sailed high and wide and splashed down in the baptistery behind the choir...

When Ray's right hook finally took the pastor down, someone grabbed the spring flower arrangement from the altar and threw it high in the air in Ray's direction. Water sprinkled everyone in the first two rows on the right side, and a visiting Presbyterian experienced complete immersion when the vase shattered against the wall next to his seat...The fight ended when the police arrived on the scene.¹

I. The Problem

James 4:1-2a

In the illustration above, what caused the donnybrook? We are not told, except that it was a "church conflict". An argument, probably started between two people, escalated, and everyone took sides. We expect that in a Wild West bar fight or at a hockey game, but in a church?! Yet, James is writing to churches here and his language is not conservative. He names "fights and quarrels", and even "murder". There may have been doctrinal problems, but more than likely, they were trivial issues, as they often are.

He uses 2 rhetorical questions to make his point:

- V. 1a – "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?"
- V. 1b – "Is it not that your passions are at war within you?"

The first question forces introspection, a pondering of what is so serious that it is allowed to fracture unity; the second question demands a "yes" answer.

We must admit, when we examine our own lives and review the history of our own conflicts with people, we realise that we may have been antagonized by someone else and lashed out in anger as our passions flared and we wanted to protect our; ideas, reputation, driving skills, manliness, femininity, etc. IOW – our pride. One manly example, the ability to navigate in a place you've never been without getting help from locals. James says [in the form of a question] that it is our passions that are at war within us. The ESV says 'your passions'; NASB says 'your pleasures'; the HCSB 'your cravings'; NKJV 'your desire for pleasures', and the NIV 'your desires'. It is personal isn't it?

Is this not the truth expressed very simply? For this reason, we consider a fight or argument worth getting into. Sometimes, we might even be the instigator. The old phrase, “it takes two to tango” is true. Not always, but many times we hold the key to avoiding a fight – cf. Romans 12:14-21. In this world, these may be the most forgotten verses in the Bible.

R.K. Hughes says, “The strife and trouble in the church for the last 2,000 years has been rooted in the overreaching personal desires of her people for personal pleasure and enjoyment.”ⁱⁱ

James says that ‘our passions are at war within us’. There is a war going on within us if we are believers. The old nature, pushed out by God when we are saved – keeps a toe-hold in our lives. Look for example, at Romans 7:21-23 and Gal. 5:17-26. Our chief end as believers is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, but too often, we get hung up on our own personal feelings and notions, and that self-focus can effectively stifle Spirit-led direction and enthrone our own pleasures and our desires in our hearts. It is at this point that our self-centeredness can break a relationship and could lead to a church split if we carry it too far.

This idea about our passions and desire for pleasure is found throughout the Bible and is specifically expressed in numerous NT passages. In LK 8:14, these internal desires of ours “choke out” what seems at first blush to be salvation. Steve Lawson has said, “faith that fails was faulty from the first”. See also Titus 3:3-11; II Peter 2:13b-14, 19b. It boils down to, at a very basic level, humility. Are we humble enough to allow some affront to our ideas and desires to pass? Are we willing to set aside personal ambition for the [Gal. 5:24] sake of the unity of the body of Christ? Farther down, in James 4:7-12, in our next lesson, we’ll look at the remedy James presents to us – the Bible does present us with a way to suppress this instinct to control every situation and direct it towards our own desires.

The frustration that takes us over when we meet an obstacle to our wants is described here in v. 2. “*You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.*” We understand that often, these fights do end up in heated arguments or even physical violence over and above verbal sparring, but murder? Is James speaking hyperbolically here or is this something actually taking place in the churches of his day? The commentaries I consulted were split on this question. Some referred to the existence of Zealots among the churches and in those early NT territories, who were well known for their hyper-passionate actions which did lead to murder sometimes, and yet others see this as a condescension to the Sermon on the Mount’s declaration of Jesus in MT 5:21-22. But can inward passions of true believers lead to actual murder? It did for David in II Samuel 11, so it is possible, but I would tend to agree with Douglas Moo’s position, “Perhaps the best alternative is to take “you kill [murder]” in its normal, literal sense but as a hypothetical eventuality rather than as an actual occurrence.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So, perhaps actual physical murder is unlikely, but fights and quarrels are going to happen unless we guard our hearts and walk in humility. Fights can mean physical

dust-ups, but most often, the word translated “fights” here refers to verbal conflicts or internal struggles.^{iv} See II Cor. 7:5; II Tim. 2:23; Titus 3:9.

But aren't some things worth fighting over? Yes. We should fight for the lives of the unborn, against political corruption, for the truth, and so on. Martin Luther said this: “If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the Devil are at the moment attacking, I am not proclaiming Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.”^v

Daniel Doriani adds, “We should fight for the truth. Sometimes, refusal to fight reflects the vice of cowardice, not the virtue of peacemaking. But alas, too many of our fights begin with selfish desires, not noble causes.”^{vi} So, we must realise that, although there are causes worth fighting for, all too often, the battles we engage in are not so noble. The overriding factor is usually, “my satisfaction.”

II. The Answer and Our Abuse of It

James 4:2b-3

Then, at the end of v. 2, James brings it back to the source of good – the too often forgotten person in every action we, as believers undertake – God. “You do not have, because you do not ask.”

Now, the Bible, especially the NT, is clear that God wants us to pray for those things we need and are concerned about in our lives. Perhaps the most famous verses are found in MT 7:7-11; JN 14:12-14; 16:23-24. Many other passages are clear, that we are to pray – LK 11:1-4 where Jesus supplies an outline for us to use to pray; Paul's declaration in I Thess. 5:17 says that we are to pray without ceasing; and James 5:13-18 is a passage that says a lot about prayer and its great power. Acts 9:11 seems to indicate that a main character trait of a believer is that he does pray. Yet, here in James 4:2b-3, James is not referring to a lack of prayer by these people because they have forgotten to ask God for those things they need or desire, but because they cannot bring themselves to pray with proper motives because of their own selfishness!

Their selfish attitudes were already exposed in vv. 1-2, and one who is not submissively humble before God and is not thinking of others first, will be inclined to pray for things for themselves. Did you ever pray for a Ferrari? Probably not – you could barely formulate the idea in your heart because you know that such a car is “of the world”, and the excessive cost to acquire one would have to come out of the money God had provided you with to be a steward over, not to hoard for your own pleasures. What practical or Spiritual need would a Ferrari fill so that God would be inclined to answer your prayer with, “sure”?

Hughes wisely comments, “A pleasure driven prayer life finds heaven made of brass. The petty circumference of its requests simply do not interest the Father.”^{vii} Hughes also cites a written

prayer of John Ward, a deceased member of parliament in the UK, which was found within his possessions after he died;

“O Lord, thou knowest that I have mine estates in the City of London, and likewise that I have lately purchased an estate in the County of Essex. I beseech thee to preserve the two counties of Middlesex and Essex from fire and earthquake; and as I have a mortgage in Hertfordshire, I beg of thee likewise to have an eye of compassion on that county. As for the rest of the counties, thou mayest deal with them as thou are pleased.”^{viii}

This is the principle of Psalm 66:18 in full effect!

Daniel Doriani helpfully comments,

“Too often, the uncertain Christian ceases to pray. Let us ask ourselves; Do I harbor a desire that is so far outside God’s revealed will that I am ashamed to mention it to Him? Am I shoving it under the bed, into the basement, hoping God will not see it? So we fail to pray. Yet, James says, some do pray “that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (4:3). God denies the request, because we ask wrongly, wickedly. He will not answer a prayer that aims no higher than the belly. Paul says, of the enemies of Christ, “Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:19). Why would God answer the prayer of a believer who wants to live like an enemy of Christ?”^{ix} cf. James 1:5-8.

III. Who is Your Friend?

James 4:4

Verse 4 begins with a strong rebuke – a polemic charge of spiritual adultery. This is a serious reminder that, as believers, we have entered into a committed, reconciled relationship with God Himself, and do not have the right to venture outside of the parameters set for believers in God’s Word if we love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength. As Israel was called the wife of God in the OT (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 2:2; Hosea), Christians in this age are referred to as the Bride of Christ (Rev. 21:9), so that, when we follow idols rather than Christ (and we all have idols), we are considered spiritually adulterous.

We see all kinds of ‘friendship with the world’ going on in the church today, both personally and corporately, as too many [especially NA] churches succumb to the seduction of wanting to please the people they hope will come to be their ‘congregation’. They offer entertainment, drama instead of sermons; compromises over sexual orientation; “get-togethers” over a few beers to discuss the Bible; crazy illustrations like preaching from a king sized bed beside your wife to “teach” on sex, or...the list is almost endless.

But that is just from a cultural – liturgical viewpoint. What about the evidence we see in the mirror of our own tendency to reach out for pleasure apart from God? The idea of it is expressed rather neatly in stanza 1 of a favorite hymn of mine by Robert Robinson;

“Prone to wander, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love;
Here’s my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for They courts above.”^x

If you think your main motivation for almost everything you do is not your own happiness apart from your love for Christ, think again. Listen to what Blaise Pascal said;

“All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”^{xi}

Enmity is equivalent to ‘hatred’. Our adulterous forays into the offerings of this world once we’ve been pulled out of the pit^{xii} and saved from off of the broad road^{xiii}, reveal us to have [in those moments] hatred towards God. If that is your desire all the time – to keep one foot in the world and one foot in the ‘saved camp’, because there is so much you want to enjoy that Jesus just does not seem to offer, then James 4:4 says you “make yourself an enemy of God.”

James said in 1:27 that we are to reach out and help those in need, and we are to take the gospel to the world (MT 28:19), and to realise that God loves the world (JN 3:16); yet James says we are to “keep oneself unstained by the world.” If we are friends of God [and really, we are more than that, we are sons and daughters; heirs], we must also reject the values of the world. The world’s values are seen in those that society most admires – the rich & famous – those who have acquired money, fame, homes and cars, worldwide travel, the finest foods and the most hallowed schools for their children; the status of achievement in some field of endeavour like acting, politics, the arts, science, etc. Many are self-promoting braggarts and seem to get all the media attention...and so on.

Daniel Doriani comments;

“In the abstract, there is nothing wrong with accomplishments or acquisitions. We should make the most of God-given skills and opportunities. But we cannot accept the system that says: “I must acquire to be happy, to know that I am somebody. I must rise ever higher or I am a failure.”

God’s value system is different. In His eyes, all humans have honor, since He made us all in His likeness. Therefore, we are not God’s friends if we define people by their acquisitions, their merit, and their station. We must not adopt the values of our culture. We cannot be loyal to the culture and to the kingdom. Their values clash. To try to serve both systems is adultery.”^{xiv}

CS Lewis adds to this;

“I have some definite views about the de-Christianizing of the church. I believe that there are many accommodating preachers, and too many practitioners in the church who are not believers. Jesus Christ did not say, “Go into all the world and tell the world that it is quite right.” The gospel is something completely different. In fact it is directly opposed to the world.”^{xv}

IV. God's Grace is Reserved for the Humble James 4:5-6

Verse 5 is a direct response to v. 4, and the tenor of it is an appeal to Scripture to remind the recipients of the letter that their selfish covetousness is at cross-purposes with God's intentions for believers. Now, we at once encounter a bit of a snag, since James says, "*Or do you suppose it is for no purpose that the Scripture says, 'He yearns jealously over the spirit that He has made to dwell in us?'*" The snag is this, James calls this quote Scripture, but there is no verse that even remotely says anything like this. Secondly, there are translation issues here. Doriani^{xvi} lays out some various translations for us;

NIV: "The spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely."

NIV Marginal note: "The Spirit he caused to live in us longs jealously."

KJV: "The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy."

ESV: "He [God] yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us."

(RSV is identical except for "which" in place of "that".)

NASB: "He [God] jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us."

The first answer here is that James is not referring to a single verse (which does not exist anyway). He is condensing the whole biblical theology of the fallen human condition, dealing here with sinfulness, not simply a particular sin. OK so far, but these translation differences bring up a bunch of questions. Note Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Zech. 8:2.

Is this verse referring to the human spirit or the Holy Spirit? The translations are not a lot of help because they are too ambiguous on this point. So we must use the context to guide us. Even here, good commentators differ (ie. Christopher Morgan^{xvii} and Daniel Doriani say "human spirit"; RK Hughes says the Holy Spirit). To me, the context seems to be supportive of the idea that what is being referred to here is the Holy Spirit's jealousy over us, and this verse then touches on the concept - otherwise completely missing in James - of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer.

It makes sense that the indwelling Holy Spirit is jealous when we stray from the path of obedience, which indicates not just disobedience, but mistrust of God and a rebuttal of God's love – cf. Eph. 4:30-32 – and notice the context of v. 31 compared to v. 30. The Spirit indwells us, seals us, and when we sin, He is grieved. This truth should make us give second thoughts to the sin we plan or are already embroiled in; not only the ones mentioned by James, but any and all sins.

"The gospel of James suggests a test of our spiritual condition. What are your longings? Is your spirit filled with selfish or ambitious cravings for things, for experiences, for fame, for power? Or do you pursue simpler but equally misguided goals – mere prosperity and tranquility, spiced up by pleasant leisure activities, punctuated by an occasional exotic high point?...If we examine ourselves, we may find sinful cravings and envy."^{xviii}

When we recognise the sin in our life (& often, we live for awhile without recognising it), we must humbly confess it. When we do, He will give grace to the humble. But

notice the start of v. 6; “*But He gives more grace...*”. This is not a reference to saving grace, because believers already have received that. No, this the type of grace that God gives believers at various times in their lives over and above the daily grace we need. Look at some of these verses: Heb. 4:16; Rom. 5:20b; II Cor. 12:9, etc. John Blanchard says, “For daily need, there is daily grace; for sudden need, sudden grace; for overwhelming need, overwhelming grace.”^{xix} Think of how John Newton expressed grace in what is arguably the most recognizable hymn in the world,
 “Through many trials, toils and snares I have already come;
 Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”

He gives us grace when we aren’t even aware that we need it, but if we ask Him, in humility, to give us the grace to ward off temptation, or to halt a slide into self-centeredness, or for deliverance from some evil, He will be with us as he promised and His grace will be sufficient for whatever we are going through.

We could cite hymn after hymn about God’s grace, but perhaps the hymn of Annie Johnson Flint captures the idea of it better than many;
 “He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,
 He sendeth more grace when the labors increase;
 To added afflictions He addeth His mercy,
 To multiplied trials His 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 has no boundary known unto men;
 For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
 He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.”^{xx}

Now, to complete v. 6, James quotes Prov. 3:34, which says, “*Toward the scornful He is scornful, but to the humble, He gives favor.*” What has been missing for those described in James 4:1-4? Submission to God. People are reacting to their personal desires; coveting, fighting, quarrelling, murder (at least hating), and failure to pray. They seek idols and take comfort in the world’s toys and pleasures. They are becoming enemies of God – or at least are on the verge of that slip. If they maintain that direction and mindset, God will oppose them because the underlying foundation for all this is human pride.

If they turn back and repent, humbling themselves before God, He will extend His grace to them – cf. Isa. 54:7; and I Pet. 5:5-10, where Peter also cites this Proverb. The Bible does not leave us without advice and commands regarding the key role of humility in salvation proper as well as in the process of our sanctification. Prov. 3:5-8 carries the weight of humility although it does not use the word; Psalm 51:15-17 is well known and shows us that God delights in us when we give it all to Him – our broken spirit, our broken and contrite heart; Micah 6:6-8 expresses a similar

sentiment to Ps. 51:15-17; and LK 18:13-14 shows us the difference in prayer between a proud man and a humble one, and although there are another 90-100 verses we could examine, let's end with Romans 12:3: *"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."*

ⁱ Charles Colson, from "The Body", as cited by David Jeremiah in "Turning Toward Integrity", NexGen, 2004; pp. 121-122

ⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes; James: Faith That Works; Crossway, 1991, p. 167

ⁱⁱⁱ Douglas Moo, The Letter of James, Eerdmans, 2000, p. 184

^{iv} Daniel Doriani, James, P & R; 2007, p. 131

^v Cited in Steve Farrar, Standing Tall, p. 122

^{vi} Doriani, OP CIT, p. 132

^{vii} Hughes, OP CIT, p. 170

^{viii} IBID, p. 170

^{ix} Doriani, OP CIT, p. 134

^x Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.

^{xi} Blaise Pascal, as cited in Matt Chandler, The Explicit Gospel, Crossway, 2012, p. 126

^{xii} See Psalm 40:2; 103:1-5

^{xiii} MT 7:13-14

^{xiv} Doriani, OP CIT, p. 136

^{xv} CS Lewis, as cited in Brett McCracken; Hipster Christianity; Baker, 2010, p. 11

^{xvi} Doriani, p. 137

^{xvii} See Morgan's argument in Theology of James, pp. 155-156

^{xviii} Doriani, p. 139

^{xix} Cited in Hughes, p. 178

^{xx} Cited in David Jeremiah, Turning Toward Integrity, NexGen, 2004, p. 132