

JAMES 4:1-3

YOUR INTERNAL CONFLICT

JUST SPILLED OVER INTO THE CHURCH

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”¹

Every individual involved in a church fight cloaks his or her participation in the conflict with pious statements justifying the fray. One will not have attended services of a church long until he or she either witnesses or participates in a church fight. Such fights tend to be particularly vicious, leaving the field of battle littered with the detritus of the conflict together with broken lives. Unbelievers feel that their distorted perception of Christians is justified by the godless action of the combatants. Seekers become cynical and desert exploration of the Faith. Christians cease serving God and withdraw from ardent pursuit of the souls of the lost.

Perhaps if we understood the impact of our actions we would avoid such destructive battles, or at the least we would implement measures to avoid such devastation in the future. That seems to be in part James’ motivation in exposing the wickedness of Christians who are intent on pursuing internecine fights within the churches.

THE CONSTANCY OF CONFLICT — “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” If church fights were rare, James would not have needed to address the issue. However, fights within churches are distressingly frequent. Nor should we imagine that this is a novel phenomenon arising only recently among the faithful. James makes it clear that conflict within the churches was a problem from the earliest days of the Faith. When he says that our passions are at war within us, he uses the present tense which implies that this is an ongoing action. In other words, our passions (desires) are constantly at war within us, and with dismaying frequency these internal conflicts spill over into the church.

This is an appropriate time to emphasise a most dismal observation—conflict appears to be disturbingly constant among the people of God. If there were no other evidence for our fallen nature despite God’s grace than the constancy of church fights, this knowledge alone would be sufficient to overwhelm the most vigorous protestations that might be raised by any individual. Tragically, none of us are immune from succumbing to this dreadful malady.

Throughout the years of my service among the churches of our Lord, it is not uncommon that I have received complaints that I speak too far too often about conflict among Christians. Since I endeavour to provide expository messages that follow the verses of a book in a sequential manner, the complaint could certainly reflect the fact that I am simply reflecting the concern of the One who has given us the text

In retrospect, those who voice the objections are usually the ones who promote and participate in ecclesiastical brawls. As I mentally review a list of individuals who registered such complaints, I can only conclude that they were stung by the exposure of their dark character that they struggled unsuccessfully to keep hidden from the view of their fellow church members.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version** © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

I believe it is important for you to understand why I would risk relationships within the congregation and deliberately increase the difficulty of my service in order to address the issue of conflicts within the churches. I suppose that I could plead that confronting problems is consistent with my nature; but an appeal to character is not sufficient reason to raise unpleasant issues through a sermon. I suppose there are some who imagine that I gain some perverse pleasure through being controversial. However, nothing could be further from the truth. The primary reason I speak so frequently of conflict and point out sinful behaviour among the people of God is that the Bible invests a surprising portion of what is written addressing these very issues. To sidestep these issues, or to attempt to transform pet sins into something more palatable, would be to violate the tenor of Scripture. I can also testify that my deep desire is that the people of God prove pleasing to Him who gives us life through obedience to His Word.

The reason for the biblical emphasis on the destructive nature of conflict arises from God's desire for His people to reveal His peace through their lives. It is not simply that the Father wants His people to live in peace, but that He wants them to promote peace among all peoples. The will of God is that His people will live in harmony—building one another and making one another strong in the Faith. When we are at war with one another, we cannot build one another. When fighting with one another we dishonour the Father and injure the innocent.

There is a battle going on in the life of each individual; Christians are not exempt. The story is told of an American Indian who had come to faith. On one occasion he confided to his pastor that it often felt as though there were two dogs fighting within his life; one of the dogs was black and one was white. "Which one wins," asked the pastor. "Which ever one I say 'sic 'em' to," replied the Indian. There is certainly truth in that wry observation. Evil is always present with us, and if we give permission for evil to reign, it will do so. However, when we resist evil and promote peace, God is honoured. Make no mistake; it is not easy to do what promotes peace; whereas making concessions to evil is always the easy path—at first!

The will of God is for His people to be at peace—at peace with Him, at peace with one another, at peace with others. Those identified as living in the world are said to be ignorant of "the way of peace" [ROMANS 3:17]. However, we who have been "justified by faith ... have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" [ROMANS 5:1]. We are taught that "to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace" [ROMANS 8:6]. This peace, together with spiritual joy, is an essential aspect of the Kingdom of God [ROMANS 14:17]. As Christians, then, we are called "to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" [EPHESIANS 4:1-3]. Indeed, we are called to "let the peace of Christ rule in [our] hearts, to which [we] were called in one body" [COLOSSIANS 3:15]. Since the will of God is that His peace should prevail in the life of His people, anything that threatens that peace is opposed to the divine will. How much more terrible is the introduction of chaos and disorder when it is introduced into the congregation by God's own people!

Looking once more to the text, when James says, "You desire and do not have, so you murder," he uses the present tense as though to say that the struggle against desire is an ongoing process. Consequently, he says since that we cannot have our way, we murder. Though his language is surely figurative at this point, I have no doubt that one could find instances where the pent up rage resulted in murder within the church. When we cannot physically murder someone, we will assassinate their character through slander and gossip. Tragically, this is an altogether too common response among the churches. This, also, is a response that is unbounded in time. Similarly, covetousness is a constant companion, as are the fights and the quarrels.

There is also the fact that because James uses the plural throughout, he is indicting the tendency of all within the Body to choose sides and enter into the battle. If there were but one individual who was always restlessly pursuing her own desires, it would be bad enough; but a solitary individual would not be destructive if others did not lend their own passions as fuel to the growing conflagration. The wise man has astutely observed:

“For lack of wood the fire goes out,
and where there is no whisperer, quarrelling ceases.”

[PROVERBS 26:20]

Why do we listen to the slanderer? Perhaps it is that we do not want to offend the one pouring garbage into our ear, so we politely listen. We console ourselves that we are not really doing anything wrong because we would never say a word to another person. However, even were that true, the reputation of the one slandered has been damaged in our own estimate. However, we seldom keep such confidence. The tale is so juicy that we must tell another, and they in turn will find themselves compelled to tell another, who in turn will tell yet others. Therefore, the vile slime spreads, insinuating itself into the life of the church.

Perhaps we imagine that there is a deficit in the character of the one being talked about, and we tell ourselves that we only want to learn the truth. We imagine that if we know the “truth” we will be able to pray more knowledgeably. We fail to take into consideration that if the one being discussed is not present it is impossible for him to respond to what is being said.

Communication is more than simply a recitation of information—supposedly accurate or otherwise; communication is visual as well as aural. Communication is composed in part by the manner in which a report is delivered as well as the demeanour of the one bringing the report. Eye contact and attitude are necessary for proper assessment of the reliability of what is said. Demeanour can change radically when the one being discussed is present; certainly, the presence of the one under discussion permits opportunity for that individual to respond to a negative report. However, few of us are discriminating about slander; we tacitly accept it as verified simply because it is recited in our presence.

Ultimately, I am convinced that the reason we allow slanderers to spill their pernicious sewage into our ears is due to our own prurient interests. We enjoy imagining that we have an advantage over another—that we have knowledge others do not have. We flatter ourselves by thinking that we are superior to another, supposing that we know some character flaw or dishonourable action of which they are guilty. Thus, we tolerate what is otherwise intolerable. Moreover, once the wicked tale is told, we find our own passions stirred. Then enmity, strife, jealousy, dissensions, divisions, envy and pride surge to the forefront of our lives to fuel the flames of conflict. Thus, James is correct—our passions are at war within us leading us to perform the works of the flesh.

It is vital that Christians understand that conflicts are not some new phenomena that have only recently disturbed the peace of the churches. Conflicts have been part of the ecclesiastical landscape since the days of the Apostles. Until the day Jesus returns, Christians will witness conflict within the churches. We cannot lay the blame for this curse at the feet of the devil; neither can we say that unbelievers cause the conflicts—the conflicts continue because Christians are at war within themselves. Consequently, internal conflicts of the membership spills over into the church with the result that the peace of the congregations is disturbed.

THE CAUSE OF CONFLICT — James' bald statement that our passions are the source of conflict is disconcerting at the least. He allows no high ideals to be advanced to justify a church fight. Hearing James' rhetorical question, an individual might be tempted to give a misleading answer—perhaps complaining that people are guilty of violating rights, or perhaps that church members are unreasonable, or that some people think the church is going in the wrong direction. We humans are masters of obfuscation, transferring responsibility for problems onto the backs of others. James does not permit his readers to escape so easily, however. He holds the mirror of Scripture, to say nothing of the mirror of reason, up to our faces so that we are compelled to see ourselves as God sees us. The picture is not often pretty, and it seldom is what we want to see. Nevertheless, we need to see ourselves as God sees us if we will become what we need to be.

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?” In a previous message we saw that quarrels and fights are used to describe open warfare and verbal arguments among members of the congregations. The word that is translated “quarrels” brought to mind serious and protracted conflict, often involving a series of attacks—the word spoke of open warfare. In the church, the concept speaks of an extended conflict in which one party, or several parties, refuses to seek peace. Victory at any cost is the goal of combatants, disregarding collateral damage inflicted in the mad pursuit of conquest of those deemed enemies.

The word translated “fights” suggests serious conflict, whether physical or non-physical. However, the struggle depicted is clearly intense and bitter. Always, the word speaks of a severe clash between combative parties. It is likely that those reading this letter thought of the harsh words that were spoken with a view to injuring others, the vituperation intended to humiliate a brother or a sister, the malicious statements meant to debase fellow Christians in the eyes of others who listened as the combatants postured.

The two words are essentially synonyms, chosen apparently to cover the entire range of conflicts. The English Standard Version, which I am reading, speaks of quarrels and fights. Interestingly enough, the New International Version reverses the words, using “fights and quarrels.”² Some translations speak of “fights and arguments.”³ Others speak of “conflicts and disputes.”⁴ The NET Bible used conflicts and quarrels to translate the words.⁵ Of course, the venerable King James Version used “wars and fightings.”

James sets the scene of Christians compelled to choose sides. Some have come into a meeting determined to push their agenda at any cost, perhaps to teach fellow believers a lesson or perhaps to seize control to ensure that things go according to their desires. Then, James strips away the veil with which the warriors have cloaked themselves to expose what motivates them. What is seen is not idealistic nor altruistic nor even reverential—it is self-serving and despicable. What is revealed is *hedoné*—a strong word from which we derive our English term “hedonism.”

James says that our personal desire for self-serving pleasure lies at the root of conflict within the churches. Though the word often connoted a desire for physical pleasure, the pleasure James implies in this letter is a psychological pleasure that comes from assuaging one's pride, or perhaps the pleasure that arises from exercising control to engineer an outcome according to one's personal desire, or again, it may be the transient pleasure that attends besting someone that is considered to be an enemy. James is ruthless in exposing the wickedness that motivates Christians to engage in inter-ecclesiastical conflict.

² **Holy Bible: New International Version** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids MI 1984)

³ **The Everyday Bible: New Century Version** (Thomas Nelson, Nashville TN 2005)

⁴ **Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version** (Thomas Nelson, Nashville TN 1989)

⁵ **The NET Bible First Edition** (Biblical Studies Press, Dallas TX 2006)

It is the *hedoné*, the passions of which James speaks, that I want us to think about for a brief moment. The term *hedoné* is used in the Bible only three times other than in our text. Of course, in the first verse, James says that it is our passions that are at war within our own lives that cause the conflicts we witness among the people of God. In the third verse, he says that our prayer life is deficient because we ask with a view to spending what is received on our passions.

In the Gospels, the word is used once. In Luke's recitation of Jesus' explanation of the Parable of the Sower we read about the seed that fell among the thorns. As He delivered the parable, Jesus said that "the thorns grew up and choked" the nascent plants [LUKE 8:7]. Explaining to His disciples what was depicted by that statement, Jesus said, "As for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way there are choked by the cares and riches and *pleasures* of life, and their fruit does not mature" [LUKE 8:14].

In Jesus' mind, "cares and riches and pleasures of life" are equated as enemies of the soul. When we read this litany of threats to spiritual vitality, we know that He is compelling us to distinguish needs from wants. Concern for the welfare of one's own person, the need to provide for the future, the press of work would each fall under the category of the cares of life. No one is suggesting that we should not be concerned to provide for our family; neither is anyone suggesting that we should not strive to do the best job possible at our job. However, life consists of much more than job and the mere provision of comforts.

Two thoughts suggest themselves whenever I read these words. On one occasion, the Master asked, "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul" [MATTHEW 16:26]? If you labour to provide for your family and for your personal needs, it matters not how successful you may be at fulfilling that task if you fail to care for your soul. We do well to care for the former, but we do better to care for the latter. Across this land are multiplied professing Christians who are conscientious, even scrupulous, about paying every debt and caring for every need of their family, who are nevertheless negligent about the things that truly matter in life. Their children are untaught in the things of eternal importance, and the focus in the home is on time rather than on eternity, and even friends are moving inexorably toward a Christless eternity because they are not told of God's salvation. Does the success of providing for the present compensate for the sacrifice of eternity? I think not.

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus admonished those who would follow Him to ensure that priorities are in order. The Master said, "Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" [MATTHEW 6:25-33].

We Christians have been given a blank cheque drawn on the Bank of Heaven that has been signed by the Father Himself. The necessities of life are promised to the people of God—provided that we pursue the things of the Kingdom of Heaven and the righteousness of God as matters of first priority. Thus, the cares of life are addressed.

The riches of life are similarly identified as enemies of the soul. Jesus told His disciples a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” [LUKE 12:16-21]. To accumulate goods without considering the failure to invest in eternity is a serious blunder from which there is no recovery.

Then, Jesus spoke of the pleasures of life. Surely he spoke of the creature comforts and the need for relaxation that seem to drive many of us as well as our fellow citizens. We all know people that complain about the crushing burden that attends working long hours and how these tired souls have only the weekend to recuperate. Therefore, they have no time for worship, no time for God, no time for preparing for eternity because they must have time for themselves. The pleasures of life crowd out the preparation of the soul.

I am not suggesting that recreation is evil—recreation is a gift from God. Think of the word itself! It is re-creation—it is the refreshing of the soul to enable a person to take up again the daily tasks for which he is responsible. Recreation is good; but when recreation becomes the *raison d'être* for that individual, his pleasure has become an enemy of his soul. When pleasure pushes out thoughts of what pleases God, an individual is in jeopardy of eternal condemnation.

The word *hedoné* occurs in two other instances in the New Testament. Writing Titus, the Apostle Paul reviewed the past life of Christians when he wrote, “We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another” [TITUS 3:3]. Admittedly, this is a dark assessment, but what is important is to note that we once were slaves to various *epithumía*—passions, and *hedoné*—pleasures. *Epithumía* connotes deep desires, especially of things that we don’t currently possess. What is important to realise is that our deep longings to possess and our desire for personal gratification combine to lead us astray, causing us to be disobedient and making us foolish in the eyes of God. Ruled by our passions and pleasures we become malicious and envious, and hatred marks our way. This is essentially the description James has provided.

Peter, in his second letter to the believers of the Diaspora, warns against false teachers. In the second chapter, he provides a detailed description of these wicked individuals who would infiltrate the churches. “Bold and wilful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones, whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a blasphemous judgment against them before the Lord. But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction, suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing. They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, revelling in their deceptions, while they feast with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray” [2 PETER 2:10b-15a].

Of these false teachers, he writes that “they count it pleasure to revel in the daytime,” indicating that self-indulgence rather than self-discipline marks their lives, and is in fact their greatest pleasure. The characterisation of these individuals is ugly indeed. They are brash, wilful, and prone to blaspheme holy things. They are seen as creatures of instinct with adulterous eyes that entice the unwary to stumble. However, above all, they are self-indulgent.

Neither temporal responsibility, nor riches, nor pleasure must be allowed to predominate in the life of the child of God. For when pleasure supersedes service to God, what results is a life marked by the dark nature previously outlined by James. Worldly wisdom begins to prevail as people justify pursuit of their own desires, and desire overwhelms the good sense even of the people of God. Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition supplant joy and dedication to serve one another in love, and soon disorder and every vile practise begins to mark the life of the church.

An old saw in the southern United States says, “Good is enemy of the best.” God created us with desires for our enjoyment. However, we are responsible to control those desires rather than permitting them to control us. When we embrace what is good, pursuing our own desires, the best is subjugated to what is inferior. The results are detrimental to spiritual health and vitality. The tragedy is that those who have bought into the lie that they are justified in fulfilling their own desires are incapable of recognising the damage they are inflicting on others, on the Body of Christ, or even the damage they are inflicting on themselves. All the while, as their life spins out of control, they cannot understand why they have neither joy nor peace, and it all arises from the tyranny of their own desires.

THE CURE FOR CONFLICT — To this point, the picture James has painted appears dark indeed. However, he does provide a cure for conflict; the answer to the conflicts that plague the churches is prayer. The key to the cure is found in the latter part of verse two and verse three. “You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.” James insists that we return to basics if we will correct the problem.

Legendary coach Vince Lombardi began the first practise of each season by holding up a football and saying, “This is a football... Have we lost anybody?” His rather pedestrian approach to football was to emphasise the fundamentals of the game. It must have worked because he led the Green Bay Packers to a record 105-35-6 record as head coach, including an unprecedented three consecutive NFL championships.

If we will be successful in the Christian life, if this congregation will be successful in fulfilling the ministry assigned by our Saviour, we will need to focus on basics. That is what James is calling for among the churches to which he was writing. Certainly, reading the Word of God and obeying what God commands is foundational. However, prayer is also fundamental. James would not permit the churches to say prayers, rather he expected Christians to pray. It is not merely flinging requests heavenward that James seeks, but it is discovering the will of God and placing ourselves in the position that we become His instruments of grace to fulfil that divine will that is vital to both the success and the survival of the congregation.

“You desire,” but the desires that the people had were illicit. They longed to have, but their longings were dishonourable. Janis Joplin sang,

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?
My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends.
Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends,
So Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?⁶

The verses that follow ask for a colour TV and a night on the town. We understand that the song is meant to be humorous rather than providing a serious philosophy for life.

⁶ Janis Joplin, Bob Neuwirth, Mike McClure, “Mercedes Benz,” As recorded at Sunset Sound Studios (Los Angeles, CA, October 1970) on the album “Pearl” (side 2 track 3) Columbia KC-3022

Nevertheless, a distressing number of Christians appear to believe her song provides a model for prayer. They view prayer as a means of satisfying their own desires rather than using prayer as a means of permitting God to work through them. James bluntly says that if we do not have, it is because we do not ask. Moreover, when we do ask, we tend to ask wrongly because we want to spend what God gives on our passions (*hedoné*). He is confronting us with the wickedness of our actions to waken us to the peril in which we stand.

When jealousy and selfish ambition bid for a place in our heart, it is time to pray that God will replace these vile attitudes with love for the brotherhood and with selfless ambition as we seek what is best for our fellow saints. When disorder begins to wreak havoc within the church, we need to pray for the peace of God to prevail in the hearts of His people and for order to reign over the congregation. When our own pleasures seem to vie for supremacy over our lives, we need to ask that the will of God reign supreme.

James has earlier admonished us that if we lack wisdom, we are to ask God, for He “gives generously to all without reproach.” Moreover, according to this same Word, what we seek will be given, provided that we “ask in faith, with no doubting” [JAMES 1:5, 6]. Therefore, the choice is ours—as individuals and as a congregation. We may either be like any other religion, or we may live as children of the Living God, which we are through faith in Christ the Lord. We may either stumble in the darkness, watching disorder increase exponentially as we stumble from one vile practise to another, or we may walk in the light, exercising the wisdom that comes down from above, enjoying purity, peace, gentleness, sweet reason, mercy and good fruits. Which shall it be?

To seek what pleases God requires that we first ensure that we are children of the True and Living God. This means that we must be born from above and into the Family of God. Just as none of us had anything to do with physical birth, other than being present at the time of birth, so we cannot make this new birth happen through our own efforts. John spoke of Jesus’ coming in such clear language. He wrote that Jesus “came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His Name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” [JOHN 1:11-13]. The second birth is from God, and not through our efforts.

Christ Jesus gave His life as a sacrifice for sin. He was buried and rose from the dead on the third day to justify all who believe Him. Therefore, the Word of God promises, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. For with the heart one believes and is made right with God, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That same promise continues by quoting a wonderful promise penned long years ago by the prophet Joel: “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13 AUTHOR’S TRANSLATION].

My prayer for all who are outside the precincts of grace is that they will receive this free gift of life in the Beloved Son of God. Believe that He died because of your sin and that He has been raised to declare you righteous.

For all who are Christians, my prayer is that you will honour God through a life that is pure and holy. If you have never obeyed Him by following in believers’ baptism, this is a day for you to take a step of obedience and to identify with Him through baptism. For all who are not yet members of this congregation, the invitation is for you to come join us, making this church into the congregation that honours the Saviour and glorifies His Name. For each member of this assembly, my prayer is that you will join with the people of God here to ensure that the peace of God prevails among us. Amen.