

Conflicts

James 4:1-4

Last week the subject was wisdom, with the emphasis upon the reality that true wisdom is peace. Wisdom from above is wisdom that loves peace and seeks peace. The nemesis of such wisdom is, therefore, the selfish ambition that destroys peace. Thus arrogant and self-seeking pursuits are not only earthly and unspiritual, but demonic. From the devil, James declares. So it follows in our text this morning from chapter 4, that James addresses those outward conflicts particularly with reference to their origin.

Sadly, there is an obvious sense of reality about his words. A reality for his day, though not many decades removed from the actual physical presence of Christ upon the earth. Not many decades after the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, when we read in Acts 4:32 that “the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul,” James is compelled to write, “Where do wars and fights come from among you?” It is natural to assume that he is writing about a specific set of circumstances and not in merely hypothetical possibilities. We could understand him to be asking the question, “What causes those quarrels and those fights that are among you?”

Sadly, there is a obvious reality about those words for our day as well. Seldom does the church on earth enjoy the sort of peace for which it was created. Seldom does the church of our day prosper within the context of everyone “being in full accord and of one mind” where each person “in humility count[s] others more significant than [himself],” where “each one look[s] not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

Sadly, it is often the words of Peter that seem hypothetical,

1 Peter 3:8 “Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; 9 not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing.”

The sad reality is that today there are quarrels and fights within the body of Christ, and therefore James’ words are all the more timely for us in a very personal way. Let’s look for a moment at how James describes that conflict,

I. THE OUTWARD CONFLICTS OF LIFE.

v.1-2

James’ point, of course, is to proceed to identify the causes of these outward conflicts and we will do that as well, but I don’t want to skip over his description of them. Two different Greek words are used, perhaps well understood together as,

A. Arguments and disagreements.

Literally, they are words to describe a war, the ongoing continuous state of a nation being at war, and then a battle, the separate and individual conflicts within that war. We are used to that distinction, thinking perhaps of the Civil War and then specific reference to the Battle of Gettysburg or the Battle of Manassas.

The idea is that within human relationships, there is a war. We don’t naturally get along with one another. Quite the opposite, actually, which in the realm of international politics is why countries are so continuously at war with one another. And within that broad description of human relations, we are all painfully conscious of individual and personal battles.

But James is not describing the affairs of nations nor

commenting upon international conflicts. This is not a passage that has anything to do with the politics of war, nor will I make any reference to any military engagements of our own country. This has to do with the church of Jesus Christ, and with Christians, whom James had addresses as “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.” He is a pastor interested in the spiritual well-being of his people. People who are often fighting each other. People, who instead of showing love for each other, are at war with each other.

It might well be a war of words, a war of ideas and thoughts. It is the battle among those who are argumentative, stubborn, slow to listen and quick to speak. Arguments and disagreements. Paul gives Timothy a related warning,

2 Tim. 2:22 “Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. 23 But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. 24 And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, 25 in humility correcting those who are in opposition.”

And to Titus he writes,

Titus 3:9 “But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. 10 Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, 11 knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.”

Over many years, I have frequently been grieved over many years at the willingness of those even within what might typically be called the reformed church to engage in such divisive and contentious arguments. Not healthy and wholesome debate, even with differences of opinion, which is crucial for the establishment of both peace and purity within the church, but

unhealthy and unwholesome conflict. Sometimes those conflicts even extend into the civil courts. Other times they divide churches, separate friends, and are shown to be what they are when they are centered upon contentious, argumentative and divisive people. I hate to see small groups of reformed Christians isolating themselves in a denomination of their own making simply because they couldn’t get along with anybody else. And there are a host of such groups, and sometimes groups of contentious people just move from one group to another, unable to get along with anyone. And sitting on our own denominational committee for judicial Appeals and Complaints, I also lament the number of judicial cases that really just fall into this category of “wars and fights” among God’s people caused by people simply acting badly!

To be sure, how sad it is when godly people are labeled divisive simply because they point to Scripture and appeal for further reasoning and committed thought rather than going along with the status quo. Paul labeled such people noble--the Bereans who searched the Scripture daily to see if what they were being taught was true. Always willing to learn, always willing to submit to Scripture, always willing to listen and learn. But how deadly it is when there are men with a pretense of that nobility but are in actuality shown to be merely self-seeking in their contentious, quarrelsome and argumentative nature. Sometimes even to the point of,

B. Causing harm to others.

As James describes it,

v.2

You murder! Some commentators and translators have been so bothered by that word that they propose a change of Greek letters to make the word “envy.” But no, there is no textual

evidence for that. James says what he means, and murder means much more than taking a gun and shooting your enemy in a fit of rage. God's people actually harm one another, and whether or not that harm reaches the point of physical injury is not the point. You want something, James says, so you murder! You want something and can't seem to get it, so you fight and quarrel. You wage war, despite your calling as a Christian to live in peace.

So where does that come from? Most people who are engaged in these wars would say, it comes from the other person! Perhaps in their self-righteousness, they would say it comes from their commitment to truth. But that is not what James says. He says it comes from within you. The wars and battles that exist come from within your own heart, from the desires within your own heart. The sinful desires. And therefore the outward conflicts of life come from,

II. THE INWARD CONFLICTS OF THE HEART.

Look again at verse 1, how James answers his own question. And remember, this is not hypothetical. This is pastoral reality.

v.1 "Where do wars and fights come from among you?"

Answer: "Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?" What causes the conflicts that exist between Christians? Your passions. Your lusts. Those things you desire. And the emphasis is upon the evil, immoral desires of your heart, for James says they "are at war within you." What causes arguments and disagreements among Christians? The lusts of your heart, the desires for pleasure. Perhaps this Greek word can best be summarized as,

A. The pursuit of pleasure.

As the New King James puts it, your desires for pleasure. Your own self-seeking, self-serving pursuit of your own personal

enjoyment is what causes the outward conflicts of your life. The English word that comes from this Greek word is hedonism--the worship of pleasure. And surely that is the age in which we live. Self-denial as a virtue has gone, replaced by the therapeutic objectives of modern psychology--self-fulfillment, self-actualization, and self-love.

However, if you pursue what is best for you, you will find conflict inevitable with anyone else who is seeking the same thing from himself. Why do you have fights? Because you are selfish. Now, that might be a little bit harsh, particularly if it is seen as the only, universal answer to every conflict. But, on the other hand, who of you can claim that you have totally and irreversibly done away with selfishness in your own life? Who of you can claim that there are no selfish passions for personal pleasure that still wage war in your members? Maybe a conflict is caused because you were provoked. Maybe a conflict was caused because you were sinned against. Maybe in the conflict you would claim to be the innocent party. But still, in any conflict, seldom can any of us claim complete and total innocence.

The pursuit of pleasure is a very dangerous journey, because that pursuit ignores the harm and danger caused to others. That pursuit assumes that I am more important than you, and that my pleasure is more important than your pleasure. And if you feel the same way, beloved, we have a conflict!

Sadly, too many Christians are never willing to address this matter within their own heart, and they cast aside any responsibility for conflict with a self-righteous zeal to think themselves innocent. And quarrels and fights are the consequence. James continues to describe the source of conflicts with reference to,

B. The desires of lust.

Especially unfulfilled desires of lust.

v.2

John understands well these lusts, identifying them in three aspects,

1 John 2:16 “For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.”

The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Conflict arises, even among Christians, when any of those lusts go unfulfilled while the pursuit of them is allowed to continue. And this is a matter of self-examination for all of us. Not an issue of condemnation, nor a judgmental verdict of someone not being a Christian. Rather, as Christians, there remains in the heart these internal conflicts. And we ignore them only at our peril.

Do you want to live at peace with one another? Then cry out with the Psalmist,

Ps. 139:23 “Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; 24 And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting.”

Search your own heart for those lusts of the flesh that are “waging war against the law of [your] mind and making [you] captive to the law of sin that dwells in [your] members.” Search your own heart for the lust of the eyes, and don’t treat that search lightly. Know yourself well enough, beloved, that you might honestly admit,

Rom. 7:18 “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.”

And beware of the danger of those desires of lust progressing into,

C. Covetous envy.

v.2

You covet. You are jealous, envious. You see the very thing you want in someone else. The desires of your flesh, the lusts of your heart go unfulfilled while you see others enjoying those very things. And you can’t get them.

Beloved, the outward conflicts of life can so often be traced back to this one very well defined source, jealousy. And it rears its ugly head in so many different ways. But it all comes back to this same idea, that you want something that for some reason unknown to you, God has kept from you. And when you see it in others, all the sinful affections that remain in the remnants of that old man rise up and wage war against your soul. From within you!

The problem is not that some other person is proudly and ungratefully flaunting the blessings of God they might enjoy. That may be true--and that’s the other person’s problem, but the problem with you, the problem with me, is that there are these envious desires deeply embedded in the heart of man. There is this propensity to covet--to want what is enjoyed by your neighbor. After all, the world around us tells us, isn’t that fair? But God has said so explicitly,

Ex. 20:17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.”

Paul even calls covetousness “idolatry.”

Col. 3:5 “Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.”

And look where Paul goes with that line of thinking,

Col. 3:12 “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. 14 But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. 15 And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”

Peace! Put away covetousness. Put to death jealousy. And put on compassion and love. Then the peace of Christ shall rule in our midst. Then we shall be one body. So identify where these things yet exist in your own heart, and do business with them. Don't give reign to that jealousy or envy, to the desires of lust of the pursuit of your own pleasure. And fight that battle, by God's grace at work within you, knowing that these inward conflicts not only produce outward conflicts with other people in your life, they will also produce,

III. SPIRITUAL CONFLICTS WITH THE LORD.

That, of course, is of far greater danger yet. And look at the warnings that James gives us. Again, for emphasis, these are warnings given to Christians. They are given so that you will be able to avoid the dangerous consequences. In the verses that follow, James' ultimate point is clear,

v.6 “Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and

mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”

Humble yourselves with this realization, that,

A. Self-reliance breeds deprivation from God.

In other words, if you rely upon yourself and your own strength, and therefore don't pray, you won't get what you seek.

If you aren't careful, the words of Scripture can be twisted to teach that God is the means by which you can satisfy your pursuits of pleasure and desires of lust. If you aren't careful, you might come away thinking that the very way to get what you want is simply to ask God. And he will fulfill all your lusts. And that's a terrible distortion of God's goodness, yet in his goodness he does promise to withhold from you no good thing. So if you fail to ask, you will fail to obtain what you seek.

v.2b “You do not have, because you do not ask.”

How true that often is. You simply fail to ask. Maybe you think it's too obvious. Maybe you think it is selfish to ask. And maybe, maybe you are just too busy trying to achieve your goals yourself in your own strength. But James is quick to provide good balance here. Sometimes there is another reason you don't have what you want.

v.3

There again is the reference to your pleasures. Your lusts and desires, your selfishness. You ask wrongly. You ask amiss. The NASB and NIV have, “you ask with wrong motives.” Literally it is “you ask wickedly.” You ask in an evil manner!

The problem is not mechanical, as if your prayers just

somehow got mixed up. If you had prayed a little differently, or maybe a little more fervently or a little longer, then you would have received what you wanted. No, that's not the problem. The problem is moral. The problem is that inward conflict in your heart. The problem is your own self-absorbed orientation that seeks its own good above anything else. And God won't reward such selfishness.

B. The pursuit of pleasure produces estrangement from God.

So how do you know? How do you know if you are praying earnestly, as Elijah prayed, or praying selfishly for your own pleasures? Ultimately, that's a question you will have to answer in your own heart. I can't answer that for you, and even in the privacy of pastoral conversation, I probably won't be able to answer for you. But I will encourage you to ask the question. And to search your heart for this evil pursuit of pleasure.

Perhaps the best protection against such evil is to carefully follow the example of our Lord when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Clearly, he prayed for the desires of his heart. Even that the awful cup of suffering and death would be taken from him. And he knew it couldn't. He knew the eternal plan of God for the salvation of his elect people required that he drink every last drop of that cup. And yet he prayed,

Luke 22:42 "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done." 43 Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him. 44 And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground."

So there is the example. Present your requests to God. And unless what you request is itself sinful, ask for whatever it is you want. And remember that often "you do not have because you do

not ask." Offer to God the desires of your heart. And then, assuring yourself that the motivation is not selfishness, pray, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."

That's how you know! If you can sincerely and genuinely submit your will in its entirety to God, then you have successfully waged war with the evil desires of lust and pleasure. And in the context of James 4, it is that submission of your will to God that will bring about an end to the quarrels and fights among us. I expect that you can understand how obvious this is, that those who are given to the pursuit of their own passions and pleasures are destined to live in conflict with those around them.

And ultimately, in conflict with God. In enmity with God. For,

C. Friendship with the world establishes enmity with God.

v.4

You adulteresses, he says quite literally. Many later manuscripts add "adulterers" but I believe the earliest and most reliable manuscripts just have the female reference. And that's appropriate, for we are the bride of Christ, and that's who James is talking to.

But he says to that bride, you are an adulteress! You are committing adultery. You are being unfaithful to your beloved husband. These words are intended to be judgmental, as if James were issuing a condemnation upon his readers, but rather he is using this strenuous language in order to show to them how very serious their sins really are!

I think you all would take seriously the sin of adultery in a marriage relationship. Jesus takes it so seriously that he permits

divorce in that case and in that case alone. It is a horrible and heinous offense to the unity and purity of the marriage bed. The relationship can't tolerate it. So what would you think of a woman who violates her own marriage vows and repeatedly engages in adultery with numerous other partners? Or a man? That's the sense of what James says to his readers. When you become a friend to the world, that's what you are doing. A friend of the world is a lover of the world! And if the world is that to which you give your affection and your attention, then you are an adulterer or an adulteress \\\

“Friendship with the world is enmity with God.” For you can't love a spouse and a mistress at the same time. So it is with God. You can't love God and keep a mistress. It can't be done. That's not so much a law as it is a description of reality. It just can't be done.

Luke 16:13 “No servant 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 cannot serve God and mammon.”

So what causes quarrels and fights among you? Trying to serve two masters. Trying to love God and love the world at the same time. So who is your master? That really is the question. You who belong to Jesus, you who trust in Jesus Christ for your eternal salvation, you are to be a faithful bride, a faithful wife—for your husband, Jesus himself, loves you. You whom he has loved with an everlasting love, you for whom he laid down his own life, you are to love him, for better for worse, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, forsaking all others, as long as you shall live.