

Pursuing Peace in a Divided World: What Disrupts Peace?

James 3:13-4:12

There are many shocking stories in the Bible, but there may be none more unsettling than the very first story that takes place outside the Garden of Eden, the story of Cain and Abel. God had created this lovely garden and placed Adam and Eve into it with everything they needed to enjoy Him and to enjoy each other. We begin to notice the disruption of relationships after the fall in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve hide from God and blame shift. They are no longer in a place of harmony and peace with God or with each other, but they obviously leave the garden together and God makes good promises of children and that He will eventually make things right again.

We turn to Genesis 4 and find that, sure enough, Adam and Eve have been blessed by the Lord and have two boys, Cain and Abel. Now, I have a brother who is 3 ½ years younger than me who lives in Southern California. We talk frequently over the phone and he's one of my best friends. I know that not every sibling relationship is great, but it's hard to fathom how quickly things go down hill here. Let's jump in the middle of verse 2 and read down through verse 7. Obviously Cain is upset about this whole circumstance and God even warns him about his desires and the reality of sin. God describes sin as a wild animal that is crouching, teeth bared, and ready to strike.

Cain ignores this warning, and the consequences are unimaginable. Look at verses 8-10. God created the world to be place where humans rule in peace and harmony and enjoy a personal relationship with God and fruitful friendships with one another. But this wild animal of sin has disrupted that peace to the point where one brother is willing to murder another out of anger and frustration over not getting what he wants.

And so we know that sin has brought a great disruption of our peace with God and peace with one another. But it won't necessarily do us a lot of practical good this morning to just say, "well, we have conflict because we live in a sin cursed world." That's a true statement but we need to dive in a little deeper and learn further so we don't repeat the sins of Cain. Remember the theme of this whole series, **We Ought to Pursue Peace with One Another because God Values Peace.** In order to pursue peace, we need to know what causes conflict and shatters the

peace we are meant to have. So this morning I'd like to ask the question you see on the screen, "What Disrupts Peace?" and I'd like to give you two answers.

1. Our Passions Drive us to Fight (James 4:1-2)

You can open your Bibles to James 3 and 4 because that will be sort of our anchor passage for the morning. We studied the entire book of James in 2020, so not terribly long ago. Some of you may remember that this passage, James 3:13-18 is the high point or the center of the book. It gives us the main theme of the book. There's a wisdom from this earth that excludes God from the formula for a whole and satisfying life and there's a wisdom from above that comes from God and leads to wholeness. Look with me as earthly wisdom is described in verses 14-16.

Notice some of the key characteristics of earthly wisdom have to do with interpersonal conflict. Verse 16 tells us that earthly wisdom leads to disorder and everything vile. Now look at the wisdom that comes from God that James is trying to teach us in verses 17-18. One of the defining features of God's wisdom is that those who possess it pursue peace.

Now, in order to be people who pursue peace in accordance with heavenly wisdom, we really need to understand where the disruption of peace comes from. This is incredibly practical for us. Have you ever thought, why can't people just get along? Why can't people be reasonable? Why can't we just agree to disagree? Why is every one so angry all the time? Well, here's the reason.

Look at 4:1-2. At the most basic level you fight, have conflict, quarrel, and war with others because you want something and the other person wants something different. Notice here that the reason for the conflict starts in the heart, not the circumstances. David Powlison put it like this regarding this passage:

"James does NOT say, 'You are fighting because the other person is a blockhead; because your hormones are raging; because a demon of anger took up residence; because humans have an aggression gene hardwired in by our evolutionary history; because your father used to react in the same way; because core needs are not being met; because you woke up on the wrong side of the bed and had a bad day at work.' Instead, James says, you fight because of 'your desires that battle within you. You want something but don't get it.'" - David Powlison

I would summarize this by saying that the cause is not out there, it's in here. Now, let's do some very practical thinking about what James is saying here. He's not saying that we can never disagree with others or that conflict is always bad. Peace does not mean complete and total uniformity in thought and action. Differences are a gift of God meant to clarify and enhance our thinking and actions. I think about a very practical example of this being our team of elders. As we try to shepherd and lead WBC well, we do not all come at issues and concerns from the same background or angle. There are many times we see things differently. That's a gift. But those differences lead to quarrels and fights when our desires start to control and consume us.

So, how do I know if I'm experiencing a difference with another person or a conflict. Well, even a difference in opinion is driven by a passion or desire. And desires are not all sinful and bad. Let me give you three diagnostic questions to ask when you are facing a disagreement or conflict with someone. These all have to do with your desires.

First, what desires are putting me in this position of conflict? You have to identify what you are wanting before you can figure out anything else about the situation. When you and your spouse have a disagreement you should ask this question, what am I wanting? It's often necessary to get outside input from another believer to help you see your desires and the situation clearly. Second, are my desires legitimate and God honoring or are they self-centered? Third, are these legitimate desires that are out of proportion? In other words, has a good and God-honoring desire become a ruling desire to the point where it's causing problems? Has this good desire replaced God's rule and reign in my life? Have I made an idol out of this desire? Powlison said this about the potential of good desires to go bad:

"Often it is not the object of a person's desire that is the problem; it is the 'encampment' that corrupts." - David Powlison

So, let me give you an example. I have been known to want to sit down and watch an entire 4 hour football game on Saturdays from time to time as a way to relax and do something I enjoy. Is that a bad desire? Not at all. But if that desire grows out of proportion to become a ruling desire it will begin to cause me to neglect family responsibilities or put a huge burden on my wife and children. Of course,

that could bring about conflict and when that conflict happens I need to do this careful analysis to figure out why the conflict is happening and what's the root cause. Doing this sort of heart work is absolutely necessary to pursue peace.

But what we so often do is dig in and defend our desires. "I just want to relax and watch a football game" we say, when really that longing has become a ruling desire to the point of causing conflict.

Now, before you assume that in every conflict you have ever been involved in your desires have been as pure as the driven snow. You've never had a legitimate desire become a ruling desire and you've always only wanted to right things in the right way. Before you assume that I want to remind you of just how much Scripture has to say about conflict and fighting among us. Listen to 1 Cor. 3:1-3. The root cause of so much conflict is our fleshly desires. We want and can't obtain so we fight with people over it. And we fight because we are operating out of the old man, or the flesh, the former way of life.

It's amazing because Paul acknowledges several places in his letters that there will be differences among believers, but those differences do not have to lead to strife. And that point, when differences have the potential to grow into strife, is when we need peacemakers. Listen to Proverbs 17:14. Once it gets going it's hard to walk it back. So, pursue peace while you can.

And if you find yourself always and perpetually in conflict with people, the Bible has something to say to you. Proverbs 20:3. Now listen, there are people who claim to be Christians who make it a point to go on the internet and constantly quarrel with everyone. They say they have a discernment ministry. Well, the Bible says they have a foolish ministry. Do not listen to them. Do not follow them into their foolishness. Instead, do the hard and good work of imitating the Lord and pursue peace.

So, we've seen that our passions drive us to fight and we must grow in our ability to diagnose our desires in order to pursue peace. But there's one other answer to the question of what disrupts peace.

2. Our Pride Leads us to Replace God (James 4:12)

In James 4 he continues on to talk about how our desires reflect our friendship with the world rather than God. The way to build a friendship with God is to

pursue humility. Look at verse 10. And then in verses 11-12 James addresses the second answer to our question, what disrupts peace. Look at these verses with me.

The action taken here is to speak evil of another person. Why do we do this? Because we have exalted self to the point where we have replaced God as judge. Notice verse 12 says that “there is only one lawgiver.” Our pride lifts us up and causes conflict when we put ourselves at the center and reduce others to objects of judgment.

This self-centered pride is at the heart of all sin, but especially strife between people. Listen to how Paul describes this self-worship in Romans 1 and the resulting attitudes and actions. Look first at verse 28 as the people Paul is describing do not see fit to acknowledge God. What does this mean? Well, back up to verse 21. They knew about God and His power but they failed to honor Him and worship Him. Notice in verse 22 this failure to acknowledge God comes from pride and it involves an exchange of God’s glory for some other object of worship, most often self. So, what does God do? Verses 24-25. He gives them up to their passions or lusts. Again in verse 26 he gives them up to their dishonorable passions.

And again in verse 28 we have a summary of man’s sin problem, we do not acknowledge God but exalt self and God’s response, He gives them up. This time he gives them up to a debased mind to do what should not be done. And look at the actions that result in verses 29-31. How many of these have to do with conflict, strife, and broken relationships?

So, here’s the reason we have conflict. My self-centered pride causes me to fail to acknowledge God’s authority and splendor and replace it with my fleshly desires. I want what I want and you better not get in my way.

*“As sinners, we **naturally** contend for our presumed self-interest. We also **learn** how to fight more effectively by extensive and intensive practice. As we learn from others, both by experiencing their hostilities and by watching how they fight. Each of us is a 'quick study' because we have the aptitude.” - David Powlison*

We have a double wammy here. We come by these self-centered desires naturally and we have learned to fight in order to get them and protect them. But

here's the glory of the gospel. We have a new nature in Christ and a new example to learn from. Listen to Philippians 2:1-8.

And next week we will talk about the attitudes, like we see modeled by the Lord Jesus, that are necessary to stop the cycle of desires leading to strife and instead to pursue peace. Let's pray.