

# A Faith That Works: Conflict and Its Causes

James 4:1-12

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on July 26, 2020

## Introduction

- ❖ As we've been working our way through the book of James, we've noted how practical this letter is. How it tries to apply the Christian faith to our everyday experiences. It's very similar to the OT book of Proverbs in that it offers practical wisdom for life. **In this morning's passage, it addresses one of the most common experiences in life – relational conflict.** Fighting, arguing, quarreling – it all began in the Garden with a man, a woman, and a serpent all pointing fingers at each other. And ever since, humanity has been perpetually in conflict.
  - Kingdoms have fought kingdoms. Nations have warred against nations. Children have rebelled against their parents. Husbands and wives have betrayed each other. **There seems to be a sinful human tendency to divide ourselves into groups – whether it's along racial lines, class lines, or political lines – and to grow antagonistic towards those we deem to be “the others”.** This is part of our sinful human nature.
  
- ❖ And it's a reason why Jesus came to live the life of peace we should've lived and to die the death for sin that we should've died – that he might break down the dividing walls of hostility between mankind. **In his own body, the Lord made for himself a new humanity where the old lines of division no longer define us.** We call it the church. It was redeemed to serve as a community of peace – as a shining example, as a city on a hill, displaying the power of God to settle generational feuds and to heal deep-seated hostilities.
  - But even the church is not immune to the curse of perpetual conflict. **The pages of the NT paint an honest picture of the early church with warts and all.** In the book of Acts, we read of a fall out between Paul and Barnabas. There's conflict – that's not settled until the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 – over what to do with Gentile converts within a predominately Jewish movement. In Galatians, Paul recounts a conflict he had with Peter. And in his other letters, Paul never shies from addressing the growing conflicts and controversies in these fledgling churches.
    - And here in James, he's speaking to the church calling them out for fighting and quarreling. *“You desire and do not have, so you murder.”* **And you thought your church had problems.** Those disagreements over what songs to sing or what building to build – are looking pretty tame right now compared to whatever conflict was brewing among James' original audience.
  
- ❖ **It's funny when you hear Christians who romanticize the early church – who complain about all the problems of the contemporary church, and how it would be so much better if we could just return to the simplicity and purity of the early church.** I don't know about that. According to our passage, the early church had its share of relational conflicts. That's because no matter how different our times and our context may be compared to the early church – **we share in common the very thing that causes conflicts among us.**
  - That's what I want to talk about this morning. In this contemporary moment, we've got fellow Christians at each other's throats over how to respond to this pandemic. Some will say we've overblown the dangers, and we're living by fear and not by faith. Other believers will say we're not taking the pandemic seriously enough and doing enough to protect the vulnerable in our communities.

- ❖ And at the same time, we have Christians in conflict over how to assess and address the larger societal issues regarding racial equality. Some would say the real problem comes down to a lack of personal accountability; while others would say it comes down to a need for systemic reform. Debates between the two groups tend to generate a lot of heat and friction.
  - And besides these larger fights within the church, everyday Christians are dealing with everyday conflicts in our marriages, our families, and our spiritual communities. Our unity is being threatened. And our gospel witness is being tainted.
    - **What we need to do is to figure out what causes these conflicts between us and what can heal these divisions.** And that, my friends, is the kind of practical wisdom we get out of today's text in James 4:1-12. We're going to see in this passage is (1) the common cause of conflicts, (2) the spiritual root of conflicts, and (3) the grace-led response to conflicts.

### The Common Cause of Conflicts

- ❖ James begins chapter 4 raising the question of causality. Where do our conflicts come from? What causes them? Listen to v1, "*What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?*" So first off, we're going to see James address **the common cause of conflicts**.
  - Now before we consider the cause, we should define what James means when he speaks of fights and quarrels. Elsewhere in Scripture, these terms are used to describe actual combat between armies. There is definitely a militaristic tone here. So we can't rule out the possibility that the conflict occurring between these early Christians turned physically violent. After all, James does speak of murder or killing in v2.
- ❖ **But most commentators are skeptical to think that this is a case of physical violence and bloodshed within a Christian community.** Considering the earlier context about the misuse of the tongue – the conflict here probably didn't escalate to physical violence and murder. It's most likely referring to verbal disputes between those in a church.
  - **But the "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition" between these Christians (which James identified in chapter 3:14 and 16) could very well lead to physical violence if they go unchecked.** James understands the capability of the sinful heart. He was familiar with Jesus' teaching on how harsh words, spoken in anger, are tantamount to murder (Mt 5:21-22). Because the same heart conditions in a murderer are found in the hearts of those who are figuratively at each other's throats in a verbal conflict.
- ❖ So just because our conflicts with each other have yet to escalate to the point of physical violence, we shouldn't discount these verses and assume they don't apply. As students of the Word, we should try to understand the specific conflict that James' audience was dealing with – **but the principles here would apply to any relational conflict we have with anyone.**
  - No matter the particulars of your case, James is explaining the common cause of all our conflicts. He identifies it as **unfulfilled desires**. Listen to vv1-2, "*1What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? 2You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.*"

- ❖ If you're trying to figure out why you keep getting into relational conflict with people – whether it's your spouse or your parents or maybe a co-worker or friend – James is saying, instead of trying to figure out what's wrong with them, you need to first figure out what's wrong with *you*. **You can get so caught up battling others that you don't realize there's a battle going on inside of you.**
  - He says your passions are at war within you. Literally, it's your pleasures (*hedone*) are at war within you. It's where we get the word *hedonism*, so it carries a negative connotation. We're talking about selfish pleasures warring inside you. **In other words, your relational conflicts are caused by your internal conflicts.** You seek to please yourself, and yet you don't get what you want. You covet something, and yet you don't obtain it.
  
- ❖ That's what causes conflict. **Your frustrated desires become envious desires.** You get so focused on pleasing yourself that you become the center of your own universe, and all your unfulfilled desires are revolving around you. That's what it means to be self-centered.
  - Now imagine what happens when you bring two or more self-centered people into orbit of each other. **When they enter into community, it shouldn't surprise anyone when their revolving desires begin to collide.** Self-centered individuals can't live in harmony with each other. Collisions and conflict are inevitable. If only there existed one Being with enough weight (enough gravitas) for all of us self-centered people to revolve ourselves around – to fall into orbit around the same Person in the center. That would be the only way to form a harmonious community of peace.
  
- ❖ But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's get back to this situation among James' audience. **Based on the context of chapter 3, it appears that some in the church desired to be teachers (3:1) – to hold some position of influence – but lacked the requisite wisdom (3:13) and ability to control their tongues (3:2).** So their desire to obtain a position of teaching influence went unfulfilled. And those frustrated desires morphed into envious desires that led to conflict with others who wanted the same thing or had what they wanted.
  - That's what's happening. **And James responds by saying that the reason your desires remain unfulfilled and frustrated – is because you're not turning to God.** Listen to vv2-3, *"You do not have, because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup>You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."*
  
- ❖ He's telling these people who desire to be teachers in the church that you lack the necessary wisdom – because you fail to seek it from above. Back in chapter 1:5 he said, *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."* **The problem is their prayerlessness – their refusal to turn to God and seek wisdom from above.** They settle for worldly wisdom that they can obtain for themselves.
  - And even if they do ask, James says they ask wrongly – that is, they have the wrong motives. They want that position of influence to please themselves and their own ambitions. It's not to please God.

- ❖ So that's the particular situation in James, but more generally, these principles would apply to any relational conflict. **All of our problems with other people somehow find their cause in unfulfilled, frustrated desires than eventually become envious desires.** You desire the same thing they desire – you're both after the same person or position or possession.
  - Or maybe you just want something from them – it could be their love, their respect, their attention, their compliance – but you don't get what you want because they have their own set of conflicting desires that collide with yours. **This is what happens when everyone acts like the world revolves around them. No one's desires are met. Everyone's left frustrated and envious of others.**
  
- ❖ Friends, this is the common cause of all the fighting and quarreling going on in the world today. **Any attempt to create a more peaceable society will fall flat if we don't address the human heart and our unfulfilled desires.** We can change laws or come up with more of them – we can create for ourselves a just and equitable society – but if the human heart goes unfulfilled, there will always be fighting and quarreling.
  - Just think about the world before the Fall. **Before there was any sin – any hunger, any famine, any material scarcity – and yet, in this perfect world, Satan is compelled to war against God.** He lacked no apparent needs. He lived in a sinless world without conflict or war. And yet there was a war waging inside him. His conflicted desire to be in the position of God – to have absolute autonomy and authority – that alluded him. That frustrated desire devolved into an envious desire that resulted in conflict. He rose up against his Creator.

### **The Spiritual Root of Conflicts**

- ❖ The fact that Satan rebelled against God – even while living in a sinless world without any apparent needs – **just goes to show that, beyond the common cause of unfulfilled desires, there lies a deeper spiritual root to all of our conflicts.** In other words, no matter how many of your desires do get satisfied, no matter how many of your needs are met – there will always be one position of greatest power and influence that will always allude you. And that's being the god of your own life.
  - We are not and never will be God. And until we accept that and properly worship the Lord as God, there will be no resolution to our perpetual conflicts – with God or man. **So if unfulfilled, frustrated desires are the common cause of conflicts, the spiritual root of our conflicts is what we call *idolatry* or *spiritual unfaithfulness*.**
  
- ❖ This is what James implies in v4. He starts with “*You adulterous people!*” Sounds pretty harsh. He literally says “*You adulteress!*” James is drawing from the OT language of spiritual unfaithfulness. The prophets like to compare God's people to an unfaithful wife who is cheating on her husband with other lovers (Jer 3:20; Isa 57:3; Ezek 16:38).
  - **So James labels these Christians “*adulterous*” because they're cheating on God as they seek friendship with the world.** Listen to v4, “*Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*”

- ❖ **The problem is worldliness.** They've cozied up to the world. They have all these desires they're trying to satisfy – and instead of looking to God – they're turning to the world like they would a friend. Hoping the world has what they need.
  - James calls that “*friendship with the world*”. We can call that worldliness. It's really just another form of idolatry. God doesn't take too kindly to that. **If you're a Christian, if you're in a covenant relationship with God, and yet you keep looking to the world – to the things and people of the world – to satisfy your deepest desires, you've committed adultery.** You've been spiritually unfaithful.
    - God won't tolerate that. If you look in v5, James says it makes him jealous. “*Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"?"*”
  
- ❖ Now I know the thought of God being jealous may not sit right with you. It sounds beneath an Almighty God to get jealous. **But just imagine with me – a husband who doesn't mind other men flirting with his wife.** Who doesn't care if she runs into the arms of other lovers seeking to fulfill her desires and gratify her pleasures in their love. I think we would conclude that he doesn't really care about his wife. He doesn't really love her.
  - But if the husband's jealousy was provoked at the sight of another man's arm around his wife, then we'd call him a good husband. We'd say that he's rightfully jealous. Well, the same applies to God. You might be taken aback by the idea of God yearning jealously over us and being upset by our friendship with the world. But what it would mean if he wasn't jealous. It would mean he doesn't care for you or love you.
    - **Church, that's why we should be thankful that God is a jealous God who doesn't take our friendship with the world lightly.** It's an indicator of how much he loves you.
  
- ❖ **But while that might be an encouraging thought, the goal of these verses is not to encourage you – but to warn you.** To warn you of the spiritual root that underlies all your conflicts. To help you see that behind your relational problems is the problem of idolatry.
  - Those unfulfilled, frustrated desires eventually become envious desires. **And if they're not checked – if you don't turn to God to find true satisfaction – then those envious desires will eventually turn into idolatrous demands.**
    - You don't just want that person's love and attention – you *need* their love and attention. You *demand* it of them. And when they fail you or reject you, it's not something you can easily overlook. Offending an idol is a serious matter.
  
- ❖ Imagine if you were to visit some pagan village and, for some reason, you were to deface an idol – to graffiti all over a stone image. Well, you better watch out. You can expect the worshippers of that idol to come looking for a fight. **We defend our idols.** And it makes no difference if those idols are simply the demands that we impose on others. **When other people refuse to bow to our deified demands, then we'll fight.** We'll argue. We'll quarrel. Because we always defend our idols.

- ❖ That's how this works. Now James gives an example in vv11-12. **This is an example of how well-meaning Christians can get so offended to the point that they're speaking evil against each another.** Listen to v11, *“Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.”*
  - So it seems that, from ancient times, people at church can be really mean with their speech. They have the potential to say malicious, cruel, evil things about one another. Now as bad as that is, James is showing how, at the core, this is a problem of idolatry.
    - He goes on to connect speaking evil against your brother in Christ with judging him. **To speak malicious, maligning words about someone is to sit in judgment over them.** You're playing judge and making decrees over them.
  
- ❖ James goes on to say that that's the same as speaking evil against the law of God and judging it. The royal law says to love your neighbor as yourself (2:8). But by your evil speech, you're rejecting the law. You're placing yourself above it. But that's idolatry.
  - **To speak evil against someone is to speak evil against the law, which is to supplant the Lawgiver.** Look at v12, *“There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?”*
    - There it is. What causes our relational conflicts? **What leads us to such bad behavior of speaking evil against each other? It's because we try to play God.** He's the only lawgiver and judge, and yet we try to do his job.
  
- ❖ And that's the spiritual root of our conflicts. Like the devil from the beginning, we're trying to be the god of our own lives. **We take our unfulfilled desires – of what we want or expect of other people – and we've turned them into demands that have taken on a deified status.** And if they refuse to bow to our deified demands, then we're willing to go to war to defend our idols. That's how every fight, every argument essentially starts.
  - **A husband and wife arguing** about quality time have taken a good desire – but an unfulfilled one – and turned it into a deified demand. And when those demands are not respected (or rejected) – we go to war in marriage.
    - **A parent and child arguing** about restrictions on phone usage or screen time have they own set of frustrated desires – the child wants more freedom; the parent expects more responsibility. But when these desires turn into deified demands. Then neither side is willing to budge. We will defend our idols.
  
- ❖ **Or just think about the public's response to the pandemic.** On one side you have those who feel very strongly about requiring masks wherever you go. They desire to protect the public safety. But then you have anti-maskers, who feel equally strong about their desire to protect personal liberties. Now, by themselves, both desires are good things.
  - **But conflict starts when these desires get frustrated and become demands that take on a deified status.** To the point that no one is listening anymore on either side of the debate. Instead, if you don't immediately agree with my deified demands – whether to wear a mask or not – you're condemned. I'll sit in judgment over you.

- ❖ That's how contentious things are. And you can come up with plenty more examples of equally contentious issues in society at large – and among Christians in particular. Within the same church. **Whatever the conflict, if you trace it back far enough, you'll find two or more Christians sitting in judgments seats – condemning each other.** All the while, defending their idols – their deified demands that they've imposed on one another.

### **The Grace-Led Response to Conflicts**

- ❖ So what should we do about it? Well, now that we have a better understanding of the common cause and the spiritual root of all conflict – we're ready to talk about the grace-led response to conflicts found in vv6-10.
  - Let's start reading again back in v6. If you recall, James just warned that our worldliness – our friendship with the world breeds enmity with God. **We invoke his jealous wrath – the righteous indignation of a spurned spouse. But.** Look at v6, *“But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*
- ❖ God, as the only God, is the only one who can rightfully make demands. **And his divine jealously demands our wholehearted devotion and our absolute submission to his Lordship. He rejects our double-mindedness.** It's either friendship with the world or with him. It's either making him Master or attempting to be our own. He won't accept a halfway commitment. It's all or nothing.
- ❖ Think of it this way. **You can stay where you are. And continue being the center of your own universe.** Where you are lawgiver and judge. Where your desires and demands revolve around you. Now if you stay there in the center, you just have to realize that your only hope for having conflict-free relationships is to surround yourself only with those people who can fulfill your every desire and agree with all of your demands. Good luck with that.
  - **The alternative is to move from the center. To draw near to God. To submit yourself to God and to begin to orbit your life around him.** He becomes your center. And you look to him to ultimately satisfy your desires, and you no longer deify your demands. Because he is God, and you've humbled yourself before him.
    - And it's when you're in this orbit, that's when you can look around and see who else is revolving their lives – and their desires and demands – around God. **When you find a community of God-centered people, that's where you know you'll find the sweetest communion.**
- ❖ If you're dealing with relational conflict right now, it might be wise for you to seek out relational counseling. There's no way a sermon can speak to the complexity of your situation. But what I hope you take away from this sermon is this – if you want to move towards resolution and work towards peace, then there must be that change of heart. **A change from being self-centered to becoming God-centered.** But here's the problem: For any self-centered person to willingly move himself or herself out of the center and to orbit around God – will take a feat of superhuman strength.

- ❖ Look at what we're commanded to do out of a willingly spirit. We're supposed to submit ourselves to God and resist the devil (v7). To draw near to God. To cleanse our hands and purify our hearts (v8). To be wretched and mourn and weep – to let our laughter and joy turn into mourning and gloom. That means we're supposed to feel remorse for our sins and a desire to repent (v9). And lastly in v10, we're to humble ourselves before the Lord.
  - **But the problem with all of that is that none of that comes natural to self-centered people like us.** It's like trying to get a lion to willingly try a salad or a fish to willingly live on land. They're not going to do it willingly. It goes against their very nature. **In the same way, it goes against our self-centered nature to move ourselves out of the center.**
  
- ❖ But God gives more grace. That's the good news of the gospel. **God gives what he demands.** His mercy leads. That's why we call this a grace-led response to conflict. **We're called to move – but only as a response to his grace that moves first.** That takes the initiative to change our very nature – to make us new creations in Christ – who willingly submit to God; who naturally mourn our sins; who instinctively humble ourselves before God.
  
- ❖ **God drew near to us – long before any one of us drew near to him.** By grace, he came near in the person of Jesus Christ – who wholly submitted himself to God; who perfectly resisted the devil; who had clean hands and a pure heart; who humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.
  - Friends, you can respond to the grace of his gospel by submitting yourself to God. Draw near and take your place in orbit around him. **Take those demands you've been imposing on others, and lay them at his feet. Bring your unfulfilled desires to Christ, and trust that his mercy is more than enough to satisfy your soul.** Lay down your swords and live under the gospel of peace.