

# **CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

## ***James 4:1-12***

**Sermon for Peace Church**

**June 21, 2009**

**PURPOSE** - To call forth Christian growth in the inevitability of conflict in the church.

**MAIN IDEA** – In the reality of conflict in the church, James counsels us to look within, humble ourselves before God and avoid a judgmental spirit.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Let's open our Bibles to James 4 (p. 1884)

1. As we continue our way through this letter, we enter again into a section of writing where James confronts the Dr. Jekyll / Mr. Hyde reality of human nature.

- In chapter 3, we started into this - noting that the human tongue both praises God and curses human beings made in God's image.

- Later in that chapter, James describes the 2 contrasting sources of wisdom behind each of these uses of the tongue:

Worldly wisdom – born of envy & selfish ambition (= Mr Hyde)

Heaven wisdom – pure, peace-loving, considerate & full of mercy (=Dr. Jekyll)

(i) Now the way that Robert Louis Stevenson's novel goes – is that the spirit of Mr. Hyde eventually takes over Dr. Jekyll. His dark, violent nature initially comes to life through a potion that Dr. Jekyll takes. Eventually, however, the potion's not needed! Then Dr. Jekyll's destructive side runs wild. He can't control it. The novel ends on a tragic note, warning us about the power of evil in us. = a Classic novel because it bears witness to truth!

2. Pastor James here has a similar purpose. This passage begins by describing the RESULTS of selfish ambition & envy acted upon.

But thankfully he also shares Holy Spirit-inspired COUNSEL on handling that nature so that its power does not destroy our life. So let's read; let's listen; let's learn.

***Read James 4:1-12***

3. CONFLICT is the result of the “Mr. Hyde” spirit selfish ambition and envy RUN AMUCK – fights & quarrels among us.

It’s an important word because conflict is an INEVITABLE part of life in this age – in our families, our church, sometimes our neighborhoods.

It was present in the church that James was addressing. He was not writing to a hypothetical situation. This church had “fights & quarrels” among itself (v. 1).

(i) So do churches yet today! Off the web, I downloaded a recent newsletter titled, “Congregational Conflict”. It begins:

*Though often spoken of in whispers, conflict is a common characteristic of congregations in every denomination throughout the United States.*

- Of over 14,000 congregations surveyed in 2000, 75% reported some level of conflict in the 5 years previous ... 25% reported a serious level of conflict.
- Most common sources: Member behavior – 44%; Money – 42%; Worship Style – 41%; then Leadership style – 40%, Program Priorities 30%; Theology 26%

A. = Plenty of things to quarrel about! And not only in church life! – Family life too gets marked by conflict. Strained relations, sometimes broken - Though not as high as the unchurched world (= a common misconception), the divorce rate is yet about 34% among church people. Parents & children at odds – neighbors; co-workers.

(ii) But the opening statement of this article goes on: *Rather than being hidden in the hushed tones of parking lot planning and telephone gossip, if conflict is recognized as inevitable – and potentially even healthy – it can become an opportunity for focus, affirmation, and renewal.*

A. In other words, when we deal with conflict in a God-honoring way, it can be for each of us a source of SPIRITUAL RENEWAL.

To the end James writes these words.

Let’s pay attention to the COUNSEL he gives, mindful perhaps of a particular relationship in your life that is strained – sibling / parent / child / church member.

I’ve divided his counsel in this passage into 3 types:

ANALYTICAL / CORRECTIVE / and PREVENTATIVE

## II. ANALYTICAL COUNSEL

### 1. What causes fights, quarrels, division among you?

The first thing James states is LOOK WITHIN! ... which is not where we prefer to look ever since Adam blamed Eve who blamed the serpent.

- That spirit of blame is still with us - > “I know where this conflict comes from. It’s you! If only you were different, we wouldn’t have this problem!”

(i) But that’s NOT where James goes: *What causes conflicts among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something – you want the church to be a certain way – but don’t get it. So you kill* (with your thoughts & words = “I wish you weren’t in my life”) *and covet - but you cannot have what you want. So you quarrel and fight.*

A. Douglas Webster comments: “Problems in the family and church cannot be solved unless we look below the surface. It is easier to clean up external appearances than to change our motives and desires. Instead of fighting the battle within, we end up fighting one another. The hard-to-handle issues in our soul that keep us from relating to others deeply and constructively are ignored; and easier to handle matters, such a social courtesies and appropriate language, become widely accepted barometers of spiritual health. But this only conforms behavior to the external standards and doesn’t unite the heart.”

(ii) So when we’re in conflict, the Word today tells us to take a long, deep look within.

- Last week we named the envy & selfish ambition that rages in our fallen nature. We want what others have. We want things according to our agenda – or we want things never to change. We want things because the false self gets proud of my church, my family, my life.

A. A boy once asked his father, “Dad, how do wars begin?” “Well, take the First World War”, said his father. “That got started when Germany invaded Belgium.”

Immediately his wife interrupted, “Tell the boy the truth. It began because somebody was murdered – Archduke Francis Ferdinand – June 28, 1914.” The husband drew himself up in an air of superiority and snapped back, “Are you answering the question, or am I?”

Turning her back on him in a huff, the wife walked out of the room and slammed the door as hard as she could. When the dishes stopped rattling in the cupboard, an uneasy silence followed, broken at length by the son. “Daddy, you don’t have to tell me any more how wars begin. Now I know!”

## 2. The next place WITHIN that James draws our attention is to our PRAYER LIFE!

Verse 2 – *You do not have because you do not ask God. And when you ask, you do not receive because you ask with the wrong motives.*

(i) When you're in a conflict situation, are you praying deeply about it?

If you're not, that in itself may indicate that you're not coming from the best place in relation to that difficulty.

(ii) If you're in a strained situation, are you praying deeply for the OTHER PEOPLE involved? Conflict with another person takes on a different shade of color when you pray for that person. It's hard to pray for someone and be angry with him/her at the same time.

(iii) And if you are praying deeply about the situation and people involved, HOW ARE YOU PRAYING?

James wants us to check our MOTIVES in prayer when relations are strained.

Verse 3 – *When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*

- Are you praying that this situation get resolved simply according to the way that you see things?

A. PRAYER – it's been said – IS NOT ABOUT GETTING OUR WILL DONE IN HEAVEN. IT'S ABOUT GETTING GOD'S WILL DONE ON EARTH!

So when you face conflict, Christian, of any type, be prepared to take a good look at your prayer life. If it's not in place IN A GOD-CENTERED way, it's time for YOU to make changes!

## 3. Third, in the context of relational strain, look within at your PLEASURES.

Verse 4 – *You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?*

(i) James wants us to recognize that conflict often arises because we embrace the values of the world above the values of God.

- We are concerned more with what PEOPLE think of us than God.

- We find security and PLEASURE in the world's way of looking at our family or church or business. Are we popular? Prosperous?

A. In the Bible, LOT was a conflicted man. He had to leave his friends. He had to lose his job, his house – potentially even some family members. He had to leave Sodom.

Why the strain? Because faced earlier through Abram with the choice between the comfortable worldly valley of Jordan – near to Sodom & Gomorrah – and the more strenuous Promised Land, Lot set his heart on worldly pleasure & prestige. IT CATCHES UP TO YOU! Conflict arises!

(ii) For Christians, James calls this spiritual ADULTERY.

Believers are married / covenanted to God in Christ. In that, we're no longer "friends of the world" (v. 4) – *Friends of the world are enemies of God.*

A. Imagine a couple that gets married, and a month later the wife tells her husband, "I'm going out tonight with my old boyfriend!"? "I love you, but I want to keep in touch with him, too!"

GUARANTEED! – CONFLICT WILL ARISE. It better arise – or that husband doesn't really care about his wife and their covenant.

B. That's who God is – our husband. He brings conflict in our life when our pleasures become WORLDLY, rather than SOURCED IN HIM.

Verse 5- *"God jealously longs for the spirit that he made to live in us."* (NIV bottom)

He's not the type of husband who shrugs – "It's OK – you can have your old boyfriend and me too." No! He loves us with a jealous love! So he ordains conflict to help us get our priorities straight!

(iii) The captain of a ship looked into the dark night and saw faint lights in the distance. Immediately he told his signal man to send a message to that light: "Alter your course 10 degrees south."

Promptly a return message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north." The Captain was furious; his command had been ignored. So he sent a second message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south – I am the captain!"

Soon another message was received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north – I am seaman third class Jones."

Immediately the captain sent a third message, knowing the fear it would evoke: "Alter your course 10 degrees south – I am a battleship."

Then the reply came: "Alter your course 10 degrees north – I am a LIGHTHOUSE!"

A. God jealously longs for our heart because HE'S THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD – He's fixed reality. He's the truth. We're created to orient our lives around HIS REALITY.

When we DON'T – when we set our hearts on worldly pleasures, they're going to wreck us. Relationships will get strained. Who cares about how much money we have, how big our church is, how many places we've been to – what matters is knowing & doing the will of God.

(iii) Worldliness can be defined as seeking pleasure APART from God.

Pleasure in itself is not bad. It's a gift of God. And there are many ways we can find it. But the goal of life is not pleasure. That's HEDONISM, not Christianity. The goal of life is to glorify God and enjoy Him through our pleasures. The pleasures of family life itself can be an idol, if it's not lived for God's glory – so too our job, our toys, our trips.

A. Augustine said, *"He loves Thee too little who loves anything together with Thee which he loves not for Thy sake."*

Friendship with the world is enmity with God.

Conflict arises when our hearts are set on worldly values.

The Word says today – in your strained relations, take a good look at what your pleasures really are in!

ARE THEY IN THE WILL OF GOD OR THE WAY OF THE WORLD?

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That's James' analytical counsel in life conflict, now he moves to CORRECTIVE COUNSEL:

### III. CORRECTIVE COUNSEL

Verse 7 – Submit yourselves to God ... Resist the Devil ... Grieve, mourn & wail (v. 9) ...

"Humble yourselves before the Lord – v. 10 – and He will lift you up."

(i) Conflict is inevitable, but it is not final!

It is a means whereby God draws us to Himself – and His kingdom values.

Ultimately, conflict can be a great source of renewal in our life together.

HOW?

James quotes Prov. 3:34 – *God opposes the proud, but gives GRACE to the humble.*

= through humility GOD'S GRACE CHANGES OUR LIFE.

1. “Draw near to Him” – v. 8 – “and He will draw near to you – in spirit & truth.” - That’s a PROMISE!

To draw near to God is to SUBMIT to Him – v. 7 - unconditionally  
 = “God, Anything, Anytime, Anywhere ... Your will be done.”  
 - He’ll show you where you’re off-course.

(i) SUBMISSION:

- Where do you hear that concept taught today? You can go to seminars on becoming more ASSERTIVE, where are the seminars on learning to be SUBMISSIVE to the authorities placed in your life?

A. The Greek word literally means, “to put yourself in rank under” (has a military background).

- In the Bible its used to describe life for Christians under their government; under their elders; wives under their husbands; slaves (workers) under their masters; children under parents; and for everyone, submitting to the life of serving one another in love!

(ii) In the context of your life conflicts, seek to cultivate a SUBMISSIVE HEART!

- It may not be that you therein give up a particular position you hold, but it will certainly effect the WAY you present it!

A. Seek to cultivate a submissive heart to glorify God.

- Ultimately all authority comes from Him. So these other relationships in the home, church and society are the PRACTICAL MEANS whereby we express a heart submissive to God.

- Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up. He brings us grace to a submissive heart.

2. Second, RESIST THE DEVIL & HE WILL FLEE FROM YOU.

- Did you know that the Devil is present around your conflicts?

Oh yea – that’s not too hard to know!

(i) He’s present to stir bitterness; despair; pride; division; vengeance.

- “If I can’t have it my way ... let them see what will happen!”

A. The Greek word for the Devil is DIABOLOS – which literally means “to throw against”

- He throws things against you, like someone pelting you with snowballs – slander, false guilt, hopelessness, bitterness, vengeance – the Bible calls him, “The Accuser of the Brethern”

(ii) So RESIST HIM = stand firm against him. Don’t let him have his way in your relational strain. Show spiritual muscle –take the promises of the Word and claim that “*greater is*

*He that is in you, than he that is in the world.*”

A. RESIST HIM in the name of Jesus Christ – and he will FLEE FROM YOU - like those demons leaving the Gerasene man, entering a herd of pigs, rushing into the sea and drowning!

- Jesus allowed those demons to go into the pigs to show that man – and YOU – that resistance in his name causes evil to FLEE!

B. Your conflict is SPIRITUAL WARFARE – do not be naïve – In a variety of ways, you will have to stand up against Satan in it by the power of the Word.

3. Third, HATE THE SIN that’s involved in your conflict.

There’s some to find for EVERY PERSON in every strained relation!

Conflicts aren’t usually 50-50 with regard to fault ... but they’re also never 100-0.

There are always places for you to find sin or sinfulness in your heart – pride, envy, selfish ambition, worldliness.

(i) Draw near to God with a submissive heart and he will show you - THEN HATE THAT SIN.

*Grieve, mourn, wail – V. 9 – change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.*

*V. 8 – “wash your hands, purify your hearts – you double-minded*

IN THE CONTEXT OF YOUR STRAINED RELATIONSHIPS, CULTIVATE A REPENTANT HEART.

A. Steven Cole comments, “The church whom James confronted had laughter and at least superficial joy. If you had seen them, they would have seemed quite a happy church. But they had become friends with the world.

There are people in churches today who are outwardly happy in their positions in the church; happy with their abundant material possessions; and happy with their self-centered lifestyles. Yet at the same time, they keep distant from others with an independent, cold heart; they ignore the needy; they never give sacrificially to the Lord’s work. It is to these types that James shouts, “BE MISERABLE, MOURN AND WEEP!”

= stop this superficial, happy-happy, powerless religion – where the heart really has little passion for God’s glory!

- The fact that your religion has been reduced to polite behavioral conformity shows that there’s something deeply wrong ... REPENT!

- Yes, you know how to dress up for church on Sunday – but your relationships & service are in NEUTRAL ... REPENT!

(ii) The words James uses are EMOTIONAL! Repentance is not a GLIB – “I’m sorry ... I apologize”

- It is heartfelt. - Grieve / mourn / wail!!!
- Draw near to God through repentance.

PSALM 32 – David writes,

*When I kept guilty silence, my strength was spent with grief;  
Your hand was heavy on me; my soul found no relief.  
But when I owned my trespass, my sin hid not from Thee,  
When I confessed transgression, then Thou forgavest me.*

In our strained relationships, James’ CORRECTIVE COUNSEL is to cultivate:

- A submissive heart – to God’s authority on earth
- A resistant heart – to your opportunistic enemy
- A repentant heart – to superficial, happy-happy, useless religion.

These are ways that we HUMBLE OURSELVES before the Lord, and He promises to give us the GRACE – the Truth & Love – to work things out. He’ll SHOW UP!

God gives “grace to the humble” ... He will “lift you up”!

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ANALYTICAL COUNSEL ... CORRECTIVE COUNSEL ... I don’t have time to get into his PREVENTATIVE COUNSEL (pick it up next week).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

So let me finish with this thought:

When you hear the word “CONFLICT”, how do you react?

1. For most of us, we SHIVER.

When we think of conflict, we think only of the negative. But James gives us this counsel in order that we recognize that conflict is growth-potential! Through:

- Drawing near to God
- Cleansing our hearts of sin & worldliness
- Defeating the enemy
- We experience God’s grace.

CONFLICT is crisis ... but it's also OPPORTUNITY!

2. Some of us react to conflict by doing all we can to AVOID IT, whitewashing it over, bury it hide it, run from it. We don't resolve it God's way.

- Others – by accommodating – we give in too easily – later become resentful
- Others – by becoming quick to compete > “I'll win, no matter the cost”

James give us the counsel to GROW through our conflict:

LOOK WITHIN – at your part, your prayers, your pleasures – are they in God?

CULTIVATE A HUMBLE HEART – through submission, repentance, and a resistance to evil

... for God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

AMEN!