



Why Do We Fight?
James 3:13-4:10

The Church at Canyon Creek, Austin, Texas
©Monty Watson – July 30, 2017

WHY DO WE FIGHT?
James 3:13-4:10

Couples fight about all kinds of things, and more serious things than toilet paper and ordering pizza. The top issues that all couples fight about are money, dividing up household chores, romance and sex, raising kids, and extended family. Most couples have 2-3 issues they fight about over and over again, year after year. These are called the gridlock issues; issues that keep coming up and never get resolved.

Today is our 34th anniversary, and Kathy and I love each other more today than ever. But we still struggle with two or three issues. One, as Kathy calls it, is “our different styles of organization.” We define the word “organized” in completely different ways. Separate closets saved our marriage at one point. Time with extended family and expectations for vacation have really caused a lot of tension for us through the years. You know what I mean. I bet every couple in this room has 2-3 issues that keep coming up year after year.

I remember one time we were having a “disagreement” about one of our top issues, and Adam walked downstairs. He was a teenager at the time, and said, “Mom, I think Dad’s right.” To which I said, “Yes Adam, why don’t you share what you think.” That didn’t go over very well. After 34 years of marriage, I’ve learned that you can win the argument, but if your wife loses, you lose too. If you have a spider on your foot, and you throw a brick at the spider, you will kill the spider, but you will also break your foot. You can win the argument, but if your wife loses, you lose too.

Couples fight. Parents and teenagers fight. Co-workers fight. Friends fight. We annoy each other. We let each other down. We say things we shouldn’t. And too often, we hurt those we love the most. The problem is that none of us is perfect, but we think we are. We can’t help thinking we are right. We are ruled by self-righteousness, self-interest, and self-preservation. When people irritate us, annoy us, or get in our way, we feel like we have the right to push back and to defend ourselves. So we fight.

I don’t know if you had a fight this week or carry some unresolved conflict with you this morning. But for some reason, in God’s sovereign plan, He has us looking at James 3-4 and about conflict this morning. James is going to confront some things in us that are not pretty; things that are hard for us to see and hard to admit. But we are willing to open up God’s word and allow the Holy Spirit to expose the truth about us, because we trust God, we love Jesus, and we want to honor Him by the way we live.

That’s why we, as a church, are committed to the phrase “In His Image ... For His Mission.” God’s destiny is that we would be “conformed to the image of His Son” (Romans 8:29). That’s why the Apostle Paul was committed to teaching God’s word, as he said, “until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19), “until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13, NLT). Paul said, “We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor” (Colossians 1:28-29, NAS). Two words that should define the Christian life

are “image” and “mission.” Image, to look like Jesus. Mission, to live for Jesus and to share His message. “In His Image ... For His Mission.”

So, take your Bibles and go to the letter of James. James was the brother of Jesus and wrote one of the first letters in the New Testament.¹ He wrote it to Jewish Christians who were new in their faith, and who were enduring persecution.² So, he wrote this letter to encourage them to persevere, to be faithful, and to hang on their faith. James challenged his readers to be “doers of the word, and not merely hearers.” That challenge still stands. To look in the mirror of God’s word and ask the question, *does the life I live reflect the faith I profess?* That question flows throughout this letter. In chapters 3-4, James exposes the reason for conflict in our relationships.

Sometimes, there is conflict over a righteous cause. In that situation, it takes character to stand up for what is right. But James is talking about relational conflict. He’s talking about why we fight. We fight when we don’t get what we want, when we’re not being treated the way we think we should be treated, and when someone stands in the way of our happiness. Whether the context is marriage, parenting, church, co-workers, or friends, *conflict reveals character*. Conflict always reveals character.

LOVING – THE MARK OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Every New Testament writer reiterates Jesus’ call to love, so does James. Love is the mark of spiritual maturity. Love – not theological knowledge, although that is important, not leadership skill, although that is important. Love is the mark of spiritual maturity. And that’s the starting point from which James confronts conflict.

“Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom” (James 3:13, NAS). If you claim to be spiritually mature, if you think you’re wise and understanding, then show it. If you are, there will be evidence. And that evidence will be “gentleness.”

If Jesus lives in you, if Jesus reigns in you, His love will flow from you. You will be gentle, not rough. Kind, not harsh. Calm, not temperamental. Sensitive, not insensitive. Patient, not impatient. Love is the mark of spiritual maturity. I know you love your wife and your kids and your friends. But James is talking about in the midst of the conflict. In the midst of the argument, for the spiritually mature person, love takes over.

Conflict reveals character. So, what does conflict reveal in you?

“But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing” (James 3:14-16, NAS). James’ language is intense. “Earthly” instead of heavenly, “natural” instead of spiritual, “demonic” instead of godly. And the result of such behavior is “disorder and every evil thing.” The Greek word for “disorder” refers to revolt and riot. That’s how disruptive relational conflict can be. And we see in society all the time. Bitter divorce. Frivolous lawsuits. Such conflict and disorder should not characterize a marriage, a family, or a church.

This is what should characterize our lives. “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (James 3:17-18, NAS).³ This behavior is “from above,” straight from God, godly. It is “pure” and “peaceable.” When conflict involves compromising principles, then of course, we must stand for what is right and deliberate as long as we need to reach the truth and to do what is right. But when it comes to preferences, and two people disagree, the Bible says, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men” (Romans 12:18, NAS).

Listen to Paul explain what godly relationships are supposed to look like.

- “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor” (Romans 12:10, NAS).
- “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ,” that is the law of love (Galatians 6:2, ESV).
- “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit ... Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:30-32, NAS).
- “As those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience ... above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Colossians 3:12, 14).
- “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4, NAS).

If we respond with bitterness and selfishness, there will be “disorder.” There will be disunity, division, and damage. But if we respond with love and gentleness, there will be “peace.” If anyone thinks he is spiritually mature, then prove it by responding to conflict with love and gentleness and patience.

FIGHTING – THE REASON WE FIGHT

We know how we should act, but we don’t. So, why do we fight? Why do you argue? Why does our blood pressure boil and we spew out words we later regret?

Sometimes, we fight over differences of opinion. Sometimes, we fight to defend ourselves when we’re treated unfairly. Oftentimes, we fight because we’re selfishness and want to have our way. There are countless reasons why we fight, but according to James, it all boils down to one thing.

“What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?” (James 4:1, NAS). The source is “your pleasures.” The source of your conflict is your own desire. The source is your own heart.

Conflict reveals character.

“You lust and do not have; so you commit murder.⁴ You are envious 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 with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:2-3, NAS).

James used the word “you” nine times in that passage. At some level, all of us are selfish and fight to get our way, every day and in every relationship we have. Selfishness is wanting what we want and conflict is when we don’t get what we want.

Listen to another version of 4:2-3. “You want what you don’t have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can’t get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don’t have what you want because you don’t ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don’t get it because your motives are all wrong – you want only what will give you pleasure.”(James 4:2-3, NLT). James used the vocabulary of murder and war to express the seriousness of relational conflict.⁵

Listen to that. We desperately seek what we want, we desperately seek happiness, and yet this is the ultimate description of unhappiness.

James is even more intense in verse 4. “You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4, NAS). James was not saying people were committing sexual adultery. He was, like many of the Old Testament prophets, talking about spiritual adultery. The prophet Hosea once said, “The Lord groaned over Israel, ‘Like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to Me’ ” (Jeremiah 3:20, NIV).

James 4:5 is one of the most difficult verses in the New Testament to translate and to interpret.⁶ Without going into all the critical analysis of this verse, the best understanding of this verse is a summary of what James has been saying all along. There is something within us that is selfish and wants our own way, and that is the cause of all our conflict.

MOURNING – THE NEED FOR HUMILITY

And we should mourn our condition. If James 3:14-16 describes you or your marriage or your family or any of your relationships, then drop to your knees in humility. This is not what our relationships are to look like, and it breaks God’s heart. If these verses describe you, then mourn your condition. Throw yourself at God’s feet in humility and repent.⁷ And if you do, “He gives a greater grace” (James 4:6).

Then James rattles off his plea. “‘God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you” (James 4:6-10, NAS).

“Be miserable and mourn and weep!” Or, as another version reads, “Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter,

and gloom instead of joy” (James 4:9, NLT). Mourn the conflict that exists between you and that other person.

What do we do with conflict?

One, you can resent the person. Stuff your feelings. Take it as long as you can until the next time you blow up. Two, you can retreat. You can avoid them, walk away from the friendship, divorce, and unfriend them from Facebook. Three, you can work to resolve it. You can go through the painful, yet worthwhile, process of pursuing a healthier relationship.

And the first step is to **look at yourself**.⁸ You’re not perfect. You can be difficult to get along with. All of us bring our own hang-ups and selfishness into our relationships. We have to come to place of admitting, “I am part of the problem.” So, don’t try to change other people. Look at yourself first. Ask yourself, “What am I doing to make this relationship worse? What can I do to make it better?” Look at yourself first.

React with gentleness. That was a key word in this passage. Gentleness is not being soft or giving in. Gentleness is self-control and the mark of maturity. Solomon would agree with James. “A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare” (Proverbs 15:1, NLT). Retaliation will always inflame the situation. But restraint and gentleness can defuse the situation and create the possibility for something positive to happen.

Be patient and give people grace. The Greek word for patience means long-tempered and slow to anger. It’s tolerating, enduring, putting up with. It’s giving people room to grow. All of us need room to grow. I need God’s grace every day and I’m so thankful that He is patient with me. So we should extend that grace to others.

Have the tough conversation. The Bible tells us to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). The truth must be told and love must be shown at the same time. Unaddressed and unresolved conflict can devour a relationship like weeds in a garden. And the only way to make a relationship better is through honest, humble conversation. What does that conversation look like? It’s as simple as saying, “I need to talk to you about something that is bothering me. When you do _____, I feel _____.” If a difficult relationship is not getting better, and only getting worse, it’s time for the tough conversation. Don’t wait for the other person to come to you, you take the initiative. You’ve got to let the other person know how this conflict is affecting you and how much you want to make it better.

Set boundaries. Jesus said turn the other cheek, but there comes a point when we need to set healthy boundaries. Don’t tolerate abuse of any kind. You may need to extract yourself from a situation to protect yourself. It’s okay to protect yourself from hurtful people. It’s okay to set boundaries.

Apologize for your own behavior and forgive the person who has offended you. Again, it’s not just the other person; we are part of the problem. Apologize for your own behavior. And be willing to forgive those who have offended you.

CONCLUSION

When you think about the last fight you had, or the last argument, or the unresolved conflict you carry with you this morning, I have one last question. Does James 3-4 describe your heart? When you think about your role in the conflict, what about your heart?

Conflict always reveals character.

So, as God speaks to you, I challenge to you pray this prayer.

Holy Spirit, please forgive me for ...

Holy Spirit, please flush ... from my heart.

Holy Spirit, please fill me and heal my relationship with ...

NOTES

¹ According to Matthew 13:55, Jesus had four brothers, James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, and 13:56 also mentions sisters.

² Peter also wrote to those who were “scattered” throughout the Mediterranean world (1 Peter 1:1).

³ This verse is similar to Galatians 5:22-23, where Paul lists the “fruit of the Spirit.”

⁴ James is not talking about literal murder. These Christians were not killing each other. He is echoing what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:21-22. The law said, “Do not commit murder,” but Jesus said that hatred for another person was just as bad murder.

⁵ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1985), page 141.

⁶ Here is the explanation of James 4:5 from *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. This is one of the most difficult verses to translate in the entire letter. A very literal translation would be, “Or think you that vainly the Scripture says to envy yearns the spirit which was made to dwell in you, but He gives great grace.” Is the “spirit” the Holy Spirit or the human spirit? Is the spirit to be taken as the subject of the verb “yearns” or as its object? Is “envy” to be seen as “unrighteous desire” or as “righteous jealousy”? Numerous translations are possible: (a) “The Spirit who indwells you jealously yearns [for you] and He gives more grace.” (b) “He [God] yearns jealously for the Holy Spirit which indwells you and He gives more grace.” (c) “The [human] spirit which indwells you yearns to envy, but He [God] gives more grace.” The NIV favors the latter idea: “Or do you think . . . that the spirit He caused to live in us tends toward envy,” but “He gives us more grace?” Also see Motyer, page 148, who gives a good explanation as to why this Scripture reference is not found in the Old Testament. “Most commentators hold that James is using the formula “the scripture says” to refer to what is in fact no a direct quotation but a concise summary of the mind of Scripture on this point.”

⁷ See Motyer, page 153, where he explains James 3:9 as a “command to lament our sin and to repent of it.”

⁸ Dr. Les Parrott III, Ph.D., *High-Maintenance Relationships: How to Handle Impossible People* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996), page 231.