

Cravings & Conflicts

James 4:1-6
ABC 6/30/19

When the Teton Dam in Idaho collapsed 43 years ago, everyone was stunned. With little warning, under clear skies, the huge earthen dam gave way, sending millions of gallons of water surging downstream. A sudden catastrophe? An instantaneous disaster? It seemed that way. But underneath, below the surface where it couldn't be easily seen, a small fault had been gradually weakening the entire structure. It started small. Just a little wet spot that went unnoticed. No one saw the little flaw, but everyone saw the big collapse. As we come to Js 4 & his teaching on conflict among Christians & friendship with the world, it's the small things in your life that may be a signal of catastrophic conflicts ahead. PRAY

Christians can quarrel over such trivial matters. Christians have fought over just about everything. A few true examples? Pews or chairs, hymnals or screens, what color of paint? Not trivial enough? How about the temperature of the sanctuary, order of worship, length of sermon, length of pastor's beard, fake or real plants, decorations, budget off by 10 cents, cran-grape juice instead of pure grape, type of green beans to serve at a church dinner. What's true among churches is also true in our homes. Many Christian homes are wracked by conflict over selfish things. But what about the early church? Sometimes we think it must have been great to be a part of the 1st century church. But the reality is the early church was made up of people & people haven't changed. Early churches wrestled with conflicts between members just as we do. The Corinthian church had divided into factions. The Philippian church had 2 women who couldn't get along. The Galatian believers were biting & devouring one another (Gal 5:15). Paul began the practical section of Ephesians with an appeal to unity, tolerance, & love between the members (Eph 4:1-16). On a personal level, even Paul & Barnabas had a disagreement that led to a parting of ways (Acts 15:36-40). It wasn't a unique situation when James addressed the problem of quarrels & conflicts among the believers to whom he wrote. The idea of this section can be summed up: **To resolve conflicts, repent of your sinful selfishness & humble yourself before God. 3:13-4:12**

1. Judge Selfish Motives A. The War Within James asks in vs 1, **What is the source of quarrels & conflicts among you?** It literally reads, *wars & fights*. This isn't pretty. James answers his own question by saying, **Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?** James' point is, don't look elsewhere for the source of your conflicts. Look within! The source is selfishness! Many of you who might be thinking, *That's too simplistic! If you knew the circumstances of the conflict I'm in, you'd see it's much more complex. Let me explain what my wife, husband, whoever, does & you'll see this conflict isn't my fault.* Whether you're dealing with your kids battling it out or helping a couple get through some conflict in their marriage, the most difficult thing is to get each one to stop blaming the other & take responsibility for their part in the war. Conflicts make sparks, but the fuel is our desires. What makes the fire grow & burn hot, are our internal cravings not any external causes. James says you won't resolve conflict until you identify the source of it. If you blame the other person, you haven't identified the source. You must look within & see your own selfishness is at fault. Stop blaming others. Let God deal with your opponent. You deal with your own selfish sin. The 1st step toward resolving conflict is to acknowledge your own selfishness. If you don't defeat it, it will destroy you. James says, **Is not the source (of quarrels & conflicts) your pleasures that wage war in your members?**

1) Your Heart. When James says these **pleasures** or **desires** are **in your members**, he means *in your body*. The body itself isn't sinful, but as long as we live in these bodies, we have to battle with sin. Until we recognize the magnitude of this battle & the frightening fact that the enemy is living within us, we don't understand how serious our problem is. Lou Priolo, in the book *The Heart of Anger*, writes:

We have angry conflicts with one another because our pleasures (desires which are not necessarily sinful in & of themselves) have become so intense that they are at war within our members. The term to "wage war" is a word that has as its root the idea of being "encamped." When our desires (as good as they may be) become so strong that they "camp out" in our hearts, those desires (as good as they may be) become sinful ... desires; not because they are sinful desires in themselves, but because they are desired inordinately. Our hearts covet them so intensely that we are willing to sin (war & fight) either in order to obtain them or because we are not able to obtain them.¹

¹ p.105

2) Your Pleasures Our **pleasures** or **desires** become our enemy. We get the word *hedonism* from this word, the belief that pleasure is the chief good in life. If you follow the path of **your pleasures**, at 1st life may seem very good. Sin is like that; it gives immediate pleasure, but long term pain. James emphasizes 4x in these 3 vss that yielding to your sinful pleasures does not get you what you thought it would. He says, **You lust & do not have; ... You are envious & cannot obtain; ... You do not have because you do not ask. You ask & do not receive...** (2-3a). Sinful desires always make appealing promises. &, in the short run, seems to deliver. But over the long haul, you come up empty & frustrated. James is saying, *Your fights come from your desire for pleasure that battles within you.* Pleasure isn't sinful. What's wrong is a driving desire for pleasure. James' emphasis is on a feverish quest for one's own pleasures & gratifications at the expense of others. The old nature, with its self-seeking focus on personal pleasure, battles against our new nature (Rom 7:21–23; Gal 5:17). It diminishes the importance of others in our minds & enthrones our pleasure as the goal of life & this brings war.² When we lose the war within it becomes...

B. The War Without Because our selfish desires wage war within us we **commit murder, fight, & quarrel**. This kind of narcissistic embrace of one's own pleasure as the purpose of life is the curse of the church. Scholars differ over what James means when he accuses his readers of committing murder. Did he mean this literally? Probably not. Although David's selfish desires did cause him to murder. It's more likely that James has in mind what Jesus taught in the SOTM (Mt 5:21-22), that if you're angry with your brother, you've murdered him in God's sight. But we shouldn't miss the implication that murder begins within us before it's actually done. Even though we may think we'd never murder anyone, if we don't deal with our sinful desires it could lead there! You cannot grow in your Christian life & you won't bear fruit for God if you have ongoing conflict at home or in the church. As James told us earlier, **The anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God** (1:20). Proud & selfish Christians are walking time bombs whose desire for their own way brings strife to the church. Are our lives filled with conflicts with others, even those within the church? When something or someone interferes with getting our way, does a war begin? The problem isn't

² R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, p 167

wanting things. The problem is wanting a thing so bad we go to war if we don't get it. This can take many different forms: sinful speech & sinful attitudes, complaining, moping, silent treatment, cold shoulder, some sort of punishment or retaliation, harsh words, raised voices, stomping off in a huff, etc. Every conflict or quarrel can be traced to frustrated desires. The war within brings about war without which causes...

C. The War Above. 2b-3

The Bible is clear that a driving desire for pleasure is ruinous to the prayer life. There are 3 things we should see here. **1) You Don't Pray 2b**

The focus of the person who doesn't pray is toward self, not toward God. Often, when we're in a relational conflict, we scheme, complain to our friends, go for counseling, & read self-help books on how to deal with difficult people. But we don't make the problem a matter of faithful prayer. Maybe one reason we fail to pray is it's hard to pray for someone & be angry at them at the same time. Since we justify our feuding, we want to use our anger to make the other person pay, we don't want to let it go. So we don't pray for them. & I'm not talking about praying the imprecatory psalms against them, but praying for their wellbeing! Maybe you're thinking, *But I do pray for him. I pray that he will deal with his wrong attitude or just get out of my life so that I don't have these constant hassles!* Maybe you realize your prayers are inappropriate. You sense your desires are selfish so you don't pray. **Ask** is a request from an inferior to a superior; a lowly servant to his lord. We're to ask God submissively, not telling Him you deserve it but that you desire it. Don't look to self, circumstances, or sinful people to meet your wants. Cast all your cares upon your Savior. James continues,

2) You Pray Selfishly 3

That's trying to use God as a genie in a bottle. You pull Him off the shelf when you need Him, give the bottle a quick rub, make your wish known, & then put Him back until the next time. He's your celestial vending machine. But Jesus clearly taught that prayer isn't to get our will done on earth, but to get God's will done (Mt 6:10). Prayer isn't so we can use God; it's so God can use us. When

John Ward, a member of the British Parliament, died, a prayer was found among his papers that said this:

*O Lord, You know that I have my estates in the City of London, & likewise that I have lately purchased an estate in the county of Essex. I beseech You to preserve the two counties of Middlesex & Essex from fire & earthquake; & as I have a mortgage in Hertfordshire, I beg of You likewise to have an eye of compassion on that county. As for the rest of the counties, You can deal with them as You are pleased.*³

Ever pray like that, with wrong motives? You aren't to be the lord of your life. Jesus alone deserves that place. & yet so many of us are trying to use God to make ourselves happy. James is saying if you aren't praying, your focus is off. & if you pray selfishly, it shows you're trying to use God for your purposes, rather than seeking to fulfill His purposes. Is James saying we're never to desire pleasure? Of course not. It's OK to enjoy a day at the lake, the joys of travel, fishing the river, a fine meal, a family BBQ, water slides, tennis, a roller-coaster, a good book, or concert. The Christian life isn't a life of depravation, but of affirmation & enjoyment. In fact, in a way Christians ought to be the biggest pleasure-seekers in the universe. Why? Because, 1st, we understand that God is the Author of all pleasure. The Psalms are filled with the language of enjoyment, joy, & pleasure (16:11; 34:8; 37:4). 2nd, we're naturally made to seek pleasure. The problem is we, even as Christians, often seek it from the wrong source & in the wrong way. 3rd, God wants us to immerse ourselves in His pleasure by immersing ourselves in Him. John Piper put it this way, making a slight alteration of the Westminster Confession's opening line: *The chief end of man is to glorify God BY enjoying Him forever.*⁴ God's desire to be glorified & your desire to be satisfied are meant to mesh. Pursue Him with all you have because every genuine pleasure is from His hand. There's a 3rd implication: **3) Pray With Proper Motives.** Jesus taught, **Ask, & it will be given to you; seek, & you will find; knock, & it will be opened to you** (Mt 7:7). & He will. Our responsibility isn't to just ask, but to ask with the right motives & according to His will. Your main reason for asking God to bring peace into your home or into some relationship shouldn't be so you're free from the hassle. I know, you're tired of it. But if you pray for peace so you can be relieved of the stress, you're missing the point. The main

³ Quoted by John Blanchard, *Truth for Life*, p 217

⁴ *Desiring God*, p 15

reason you should pray for peace is so God might be glorified. He's never glorified by our strife & quarreling. He isn't magnified by our bickering. He's glorified in us when we crucify ourselves & allow His love to flow through us, even toward those who treat us wrongly. Ask God to be glorified in your relationships & He will answer!

The way to resolve conflict with others isn't to win the war with them or to kill them. No. It's to wage war against those powerful forces that are waging war in your soul! Judge your selfish motives, daily crucify yourself & you'll begin moving in the direction of peace in your relationships within the church, within your family, & within your community. For example, why do you get so upset about other drivers? Why doesn't everyone get as mad as you? If traffic really caused rage, everyone would be expressing the same rage as you, but many don't. Some are smiling. Since others aren't responding like you, maybe it has more to do with you than the traffic. James wants you to know your road-rage is rooted in idolatry. God hasn't allowed you to be king of the road. He's shown you what's on the throne of your heart at that moment & it isn't Him. It's pride & idolatry to elevate your desire to drive a certain speed in your lane & never have to step on the brake or yield to another driver! You need to yield to God that desire & humbly remember God is God & you are not! He's in control & you are not. We must pray something like this: *God help me see what personal desire I'm trying to protect or gain? Why is this thing I such a big deal to me? Am I desiring my preferences, pursuits, & pleasures more than seeking to please You?* The Word of God is a mirror. Therefore, pray as you read for God to show you where it reflects sin within you. Heb 4:12 says Scripture gets to our thoughts & motives. We need that! If that's not enough James keeps going.

2. Turn From Spiritual Adultery A. Enemy of God 4

What's the connection between spiritual adultery & resolving conflicts? If you go to a counselor or psychologist & complain about a relational conflict, he'll give you some techniques to help resolve the problems. But they only represent the best of man's wisdom. They overlook the root problem in relational conflicts, which is the entrenched selfishness of each party. & you can't deal with selfishness unless you enthrone Jesus as Lord. In other words, all relational conflicts are rooted in

a spiritual problem. In vss 1-3, James confronted selfishness as the source of conflict. Now he ties in selfishness with worldliness & shows at the root of it all is unfaithfulness to God. After repeatedly addressing his readers as **my brethren & my beloved brethren**, this comes as a shock. **You adulteresses!** James is picking up a familiar theme from the OT, that God is the husband & His people are His wife. For example, Is 54:5 states, **For your husband is your Maker, whose name is the Lord of hosts...** In many passages, God accuses Israel of spiritual adultery because of their unfaithfulness (Is 1:21; 50:1; 57:3; Jer 3:1-20; 13:27; Ezek 16:35-39; 23:1-49). Maybe the most moving text of all is when God commanded the prophet Hosea to marry the prostitute Gomer. After bearing children with him, she was unfaithful to him. Eventually, Gomer ended up on the slave market, totally degraded. God commanded Hosea to go & buy her back & restore her as his wife. What a picture of God's love for us, His wayward people! The NT picks up the theme of God as our husband when Paul says the marriage relationship is a picture of Christ & the church (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:22-33; Rev 19, 21). He is our Bridegroom & we are His bride. This means when we turn away from Him & selfishly embrace the world, we're sinning against His great love that bought us out of the slave market of sin. John contrasts the love of the world with the love of God: **Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh & the lust of the eyes & the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world** (1 Jn 2:15-16). If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, you belong to His family. We are His bride. You must turn from this evil world & be faithful to Him. Just as marital adultery is sin, so is spiritual adultery. James seems to want to wake us from our spiritual complacency. He wants us to drop our excuses & face the magnitude of our sin. We play politics in the church, attacking each other & rallying others to our cause. We're squabbling in our homes, but shrugging it off as normal behavior. James says, *That's normal in the world, but you're not of the world. You're the bride of Christ. To engage in selfish conflict is to commit spiritual adultery. Face the seriousness of your sin!* Those who persist in living as friends of the world are possibly without grace, not a Christian, despite their claims to faith. Paul says of such, **as I have often told you before & now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ.**

Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, & their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things (Phil 3:18-19). They are friends of the world! As serious as this is, James speaks with love for these believers, even when he says, **You adulteresses**. Even Paul said to Elymas the magician (& the vs before specifically says he was filled with the Holy Spirit), **You who are full of all deceit & fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?** (Acts 13:10). Then he struck him with blindness! Sometimes love must speak boldly to confront the person who is destroying himself & others by his sinful desires & conflicts. But efore you speak, check your motives. Make sure you're seeking God's glory & kingdom alone. Make sure your flesh doesn't delight in demeaning others. Just as marital adultery is serious sin, even more so spiritual adultery is serious sin. Take your pick: Are you married to God or to the world? Imagine a couple that gets married & a month later the husband tells his wife, *I'm going out with my old girlfriend. I love you, but I want to keep in touch with her.* Needless to say, that marriage is in trouble! When you get married, you vow to forsake all others & be devoted exclusively to your spouse. In the same way, when you come to Jesus as Savior & Lord, you say goodbye to the world. It used to be your companion & friend. But you can't bring it into your marriage to Jesus. He allows no rivals. You're either friends with the world & an enemy of God or friends with God & an enemy of the world. How frightening to make yourself an enemy of the almighty God. But what does it mean to be a friend of the world? Friendship with the world means living to please yourself. Following your own pleasures & desires & quarreling with those around you. Again, God isn't against us enjoying pleasure. Rather, He's against us finding pleasure in the wrong things or in wrong ways. Knowing God is the ultimate pleasure. The Psalms often proclaim this truth:

Ps 16:11 says, **You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever.**

Ps 36:7-9 tells us, **How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God! & the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings. They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house; & You give them to drink of the river of Your delights. For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light.**

& then in Ps 37:4 we read, **Delight yourself in the Lord; & He will give you the desires of your heart.**

The point is the world is the evil system that competes with God. It offers you pleasure apart from God. But true, lasting, eternal pleasure is to be had only in God Himself! As He says, **My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water** (Jer 2:13). Friendship with the world means trying to satisfy your thirst in man-made, broken cisterns that leak. Every time you go for a drink, they're dry. Only God is the fountain of living water that satisfies the soul! At the heart of worldliness in whatever form it takes is, living to please yourself apart from God. That is spiritual adultery! & then we come to vs 5.

B. Jealousy of God. This is the most difficult vs in James to translate. Some say it's one of the most difficult vss in the entire NT. So we cannot be dogmatic in our interpretation of it. 2 problems: The statement **Scripture says** leads us to look to the OT for a source, but there isn't one. James is probably summarizing the general theme of God's jealousy as it's expressed in various places in the OT (Ex 20:5; 34:14; Zech 8:2). 2^{ndly}, there are 2 basic translation options, with several variations within each. These come from several ambiguities in the Greek text. Does the word **spirit** refer to the human spirit or the Holy Spirit? If it's the human spirit, the vs refers to the universal tendency we all have toward envy & jealousy of one another. Or that God yearns over the plight of our human spirits which were given to us in creation. If, however, this is referring to the Holy Spirit, it means the indwelling Holy Spirit is jealous that we not fall to the error of friendship with the world. Some (KJV, NIV) translate the vs, **The spirit (small S) which He has made to dwell in us lusts with envy**. In this sense, the vs is warning against the tendency of the sinful human spirit towards the sin of envy. Others (NASB, ESV) translate it, **He (God) jealously desires the Spirit (capital S) which He has made to dwell in us**. Translating it this way, James is referring to God's holy jealousy for His people. In vs 4, James has warned against spiritual adultery. Vs 5 would naturally, then, refer to God's holy jealousy as our Husband, which yearns for our faithfulness by the power of His Spirit within us. I prefer this translation. In a godly marriage, there's a healthy form of jealousy which a husband should have for his wife. If he found out she was seeing an old boyfriend, he'd rightly be jealous of her affection. If he shrugged it off & said, *I'm entitled to have my old girlfriend & my wife*

too, we'd wonder whether he really loved his wife. Of course, there's also a sinful form of jealousy in marriage. Where the husband checks the odometer on the car & grills his wife every night about where she'd been & what she'd done each day. Basically, he doesn't trust her, even though he has no reason not to. That isn't godly jealousy but a selfish attempt to control someone else. As I understand vs 5, we must give total allegiance to God. He's a righteously jealous Husband who tolerates no rivals. We cannot follow sin & follow Christ at the same time. We cannot live for self & yet claim to be a Christian. We cannot claim to be the bride of Christ & then run to the world. James is saying if we're having conflicts in our relationships, the place to begin is to turn from all spiritual adultery & be exclusively devoted to God. Living for self & seeking pleasure apart from God is to commit spiritual adultery. This jealous Spirit is inside us. When we sin, He is pained! Furthermore, His jealousy is passionate & He longs or yearns for us intensely.⁵ To realize the awesomely holy God is personally, passionately, & lovingly jealous for our affection, ought to stop any of our affairs with the world & cause us to prostrate our souls adoringly before Him (1 Jn 4:19). & then we come to vs 6. Aren't you glad for it?

C. The Grace of God 6

The flow of thought between vss 5 & 6 is, *If God's demand of absolute fidelity seems impossible, know that with the demand He gives the grace to obey it.* In fact, He gives **greater grace** than we need. That's the answer, more grace! This isn't saving grace, because every believer has that. Rather, it's literally *greater grace*, God's gracious supply to live as we ought in a fallen world. As Augustine put it, *God gives what He demands.*⁶ For the believer, there's always greater grace. This is without doubt one of the most comforting texts in all of Scripture. But we must understand that God doesn't give grace to the proud, self-reliant, selfish, & self-righteous person. He opposes the proud. Rather, He gives grace to the humble. As Ps 107:9 puts it, **For He has satisfied the thirsty soul, & the hungry soul He has filled with what is good.** His grace is greater than our selfish desires. His grace is more powerful than our cravings for lesser things. If you've drifted from God into any

⁵ James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical & Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St James*, p 264

⁶ Douglas Moo, *James*, p 147

form of spiritual adultery, don't miss James' words, **He gives a greater grace**. You may be thinking, *But you don't know what I've done!* True, but God does. & He plainly states, **He gives a greater grace**. As we sing, it is *grace greater than all our sins*.⁷ & it's grace greater than all of our self-inflicted conflicts. It draws us to the Lord Jesus Himself as our all in all. Annie Johnson Flint wrote,

*He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;
To added affliction He addeth His mercy;
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.*

*When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.*

*Fear not that thy need shall exceed His provision,
Our God ever yearns His resources to share;
Lean hard on the arm everlasting, availing;
The Father both thee & thy load will upbear.*

*His love has no limit; His grace has no measure.
His power has no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, & giveth, & giveth again!*

If you're in conflict, consider the shocking possibility that you're living for self, which is the essence of worldliness. Turn from such spiritual adultery, humble yourself & ask for God's grace. As Paul said when addressing the conflicts between Jews & Gentiles, **For He Himself is our peace** (Eph 2:14). Let Christ be your peace in conflict! Perhaps you're so stubborn you've never lost an argument & you're always right. Perhaps you're such a knot-head that you never listen to anyone. Now you find your relationships are rusting away, your friends find your presence a burden, but you want to change. God will give you more grace. Perhaps your life has insurmountable obstacles. Maybe a terminal disease. There is more grace. Or a loved one's death. There is more grace. Or a shattering divorce. There is more grace. Or the bitter ashes of failure. There is more grace. It's true that **He gives us more grace**, there's always greater grace, grace upon grace, grace heaped on grace. But it's also true that **God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble** (6). Have we provoked our Maker's jealousy? If so, He will give us more grace as we come humbly to Him.

⁷ *Grace Greater Than Our Sin* by Julia H Johnston, #78 in our hymnal.