

# James 4:1-10

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[ 0 : 00 ] James chapter 4, verse 1. What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Well, James, I'll tell you. I'll tell you. I'll tell you. I'll tell you. That's obvious. That's an easy place to start. It's them. It's them. In my marriage, it's my spouse. She just doesn't understand.

At work, it's my colleagues. They started this. I just defended myself. Children, boys and girls, look up for a second, boys and girls. Think about it for a moment. You'll not need to think too long. When you have fights and quarrels with your brothers and sisters, whose fault is it? It's them, isn't it? It's their fault. With our friends, she was so nasty to me, and I won't stand for it. He's just so arrogant, and somebody needed to tell him.

In church, when there's division in church life, they said that thing, and they need to apologize. They don't approve of the way that I do the Christian life, and I won't have anybody look down on me. They won't treat me like that. Of course, in society, it's the left's fault. It's the right's fault. It's everybody in between's fault.

[ 1 : 32 ] Our problems are their fault. It's true, isn't it? Okay, you know you're not perfect, but fights and quarrels, wherever conflict turns up, if it wasn't for them, whoever they are, they wouldn't happen.

Well, I'm glad we've cleared that up. Let's pray and go home. Now, we haven't cleared anything up, have we? Because James doesn't just ask the question, he answers it as well. James is turning the heat up on the behavior of these scattered churches, these Christian communities that are struggling and facing hard opposition, state-level opposition, because they name the name of Christ, and because of that, it has become increasingly clear to us, as we've gone through this letter, that they are marked by all kinds of conflict.

There is the angry rhetoric of the leaders. There is political manipulation going on. There is partiality being shown to the rich and the powerful in the hope that they could get this group out of their trials, the trials that the Lord has sent their way. And because of all of that, there is a neglect of the needy. They're too busy arguing and fighting amongst themselves and railing against what's going on around them. The needy among them get lost. And there's insults and there's boasting.

Chapter 3, verse 16, have a look. Disorder and every vile practice. So James asks the question, but he's not looking for an answer. He gives us the answer. And what he says is uncomfortable because he doesn't use the word them, does he? He uses the word you.

It's clear as day, verse 1, your passions at war within you. Seems we need to rethink things. Seems we need to take a different perspective on the fights and quarrels that we get caught up in. But here's the thing, if we are prepared to do that this morning, if we are prepared to rethink, not all of us are. It's worth saying not all of us are prepared to do that because there's great safety and security in being able to point the finger at other people.

[ 3 : 48 ] There's great safety and security in being able to apportion blame for my problems to someone else without having to look at myself. But if we are prepared to revisit the question of where conflict in our lives, in our world, comes from, while James does have a hard and searching word for us, he also holds out the hope of change. Change that replaces blame and bitterness with lightness and liberty.

So I want us to see that James tells us where conflict really comes from, number one, what it really is, number two, and what we should really do about it, number three. Let's go on that journey. Number one, where does conflict really come from? Verses one to three, what causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. There's no mention of them. Your passions, your desires, your covetous heart. James draws a big, fat,

unmistakable line straight from our fights to our hearts.

Our desires that go unmet, our coveting that cultivates resentment, and the quarrels that inevitably follow our envy. Our envy, that is the source of the unrest.

Now, in the context we've seen over these weeks, these are these scattered churches that are facing the brunt of the Jewish zealots, hounding them out of their homes and their communities. And in some cases, even what we saw with Stephen in Acts chapter 7, they are even prepared to kill.

We know that Saul of Tarsus was a leader of this group, and he was breathing murderous threats against these churches, even as he was accosted by the Lord on the Damascus Road.

[ 5 : 53 ] But in these trials, these Christians are struggling to trust God and His purposes, and instead they're envying the ruling elite who were chasing them. They are coveting the power of this group that are making their life so difficult, and they desire the influence that their persecutors have. So what they've decided to do is return like for like. When it says in verse 2, can you see that you desire and do not have, so you murder? It is possible, I guess, and many people take it this way, that James intends this in the sense that Jesus meant it. That is, to harbor anger for someone is to murder them in your heart. But I actually think that it's more likely to be referring to actual murderer. A like-for-like response, if you like, in the name of Christ to the zealots and the way that they're being treated. Just as they killed the godly Stephen, well, so it is that in this context, we fight back. They fight against their persecution. And what is going on? They are fighting back, literally in this case, in their pursuit of God's righteousness.

They have chosen to adopt the world's methods to bring about godly ends. And James says this is wrongheaded, and it is more about their ego, their desire to get out of their trials, their desire to be powerful and influential than anything else. But there's also, verse 1, wars within you among the community itself. When you envy another person's state and your passions, your desires for what they have are thwarted, you get angry. And you turn your anger on those who have what you want but you don't have. It could be their skin color. It could be their sex. It could be their status. It could be anything.

Those three are just the areas where we have conflict in our culture at the moment, where people say, it's them. They're the problem. But James is saying, trace that conflict all the way back to its source, and you will find coveting and envy. And those things live in your heart.

It is God who assigns to each whatever they have. It is God who is sovereign over every square inch. It is God who gives us what we have and keeps from us what we don't have. And what we have, we should receive with thanksgiving, and we should be content with what He gives. We should not be looking at what He gave to someone else and hating them for it. Because God chose to give something to John and something else to Susan, it doesn't mean that He's being unfair, nor is it a conflict between John and Susan, a cause for conflict between John and Susan, or, for that matter, all their online followers. If someone gets something that you want because of injustice, well, there is more to say, yes. But even then, that's the case for James' hearers. And they are experiencing terrible injustice, persecution for naming the name of Christ, and still James exhorts them to put aside their envy, and they're fighting.

And James doesn't stop at the interpersonal conflict. Do you see that? He traces it back even further, because our envy of others is actually, when you get to the bottom of it, it is actually an expression of our dissatisfaction with God's providence in our lives. He hasn't given us what we want or what we think we deserve. He has given to that person, however undeserving they may be, what we want. I am angry with God.

[ 9 : 32 ] When your passions for what you want go unmet, twists up your relationship with God, it cannot but twist up your relationship with God. Can you see that in verses 2 and 3? Verse 2, first of all, you do not have because you do not ask. Our prayer life, when we are angry in this way, when these desires that are directed, misdirected, twisted up desires, when these are at play, when they kind of lead things for us, our anger at God means that our prayer life becomes superficial. We're not honest with Him. We're not really telling Him what's going on in our heart. And the reason for that is, well, we don't ask for the sort of things that we know we shouldn't be asking for the sort of things that we really want. We shouldn't be asking for another person's status. We shouldn't be asking that God would take someone out and give us what they had. And we know that, so we don't ask. So our prayer life becomes superficial.

But then from time to time, the desire just becomes so strong, and we do ask, but we ask in a veiled way. Lord, Lord, give me privilege and influence for the sake of your kingdom.

But God, of course, can see through it. He knows our hearts. Verse 3, you ask and you don't receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions. You ask because it's what you desire for yourself.

You're praying that God would get on board with your ego in whatever guise that takes. And the truth is, we know when we're doing that. James simply says God is deaf to those requests. When we pray for the sake of our ego, as one author puts it, we find heaven made of brass. Our prayers don't go up there. Now, just to be clear, James isn't saying ambition is necessarily wrong. To be faithful to God doesn't mean that you don't have any goals in life. Nor is he saying that when life is tough for whatever reason that you don't pray for the hardship to be lifted. Nor again is he saying that we shouldn't pray for deliverance from enemies of the gospel who oppress us, or for the vindication of God's name.

[ 11 : 51 ] Those things are all good things to pray for. But there is a difference between being ambitious because you want your life to be used for the glory of God or being ambitious for your own glory.

There is a difference between praying from a place of rest in Jesus and patient confidence that God will deliver his people and vindicate his name in his time, and seeking to crush and destroy those who oppose us. World of difference. If your desire is for revenge rather than the peace that will deliver a harvest of righteousness, remember 3 verse 18, then your motives are skewed, and God who knows your heart won't listen. Conflict flows from the distorted desires in our hearts. And James then gives this approach to life a name. Second point, what it really is. What is this really? Verse 4, You adulterous people, 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. It's friendship with the world. That kind of approach is friendship with the world, he's saying. Now, I mentioned when an earlier reference to the world came up in this letter, that Christians often hear language of world and worldliness, and they think, oh, sex, drugs, and rock and roll. That's the vices that go in the drawer that, you know, we're not allowed as Christians. We think sometimes being worldly is being overly involved in the material creation. That's not the case. That's not what James means. Rather, what he's talking about here when he talks about friendship with the world is he's describing a life that is driven by selfish ambition and envy. A selfish ambition and envy that both mimics the zealotry of their opponents as the way to change their circumstances and transform society, and that creates conflict in the community. A way of looking at the world and acting towards the world that is driven from your passions and desires that inevitably then will create conflict with others.

And James is saying that when the church adopts worldly assumptions regarding truth and power and how society has changed, it is living out of the wisdom we saw last week described. Look at 3:15 again. Earthly, unspiritual, demonic. The world, the flesh, and the devil. James says, to do that, Christian, is sleeping with the enemy. You adulterous people. It is spiritual adultery.

[ 14 : 42 ] Now, what that means is, on a personal level, we are to cultivate contentment with what God has allotted to us and refuse envy at every turn. Every good and perfect gift comes down from God, James chapter 1. Whatever He has given you, how you look, what you have, where you are in life, is to be received as a gift from His hand with gratitude and thanksgiving.

And God shows no partiality, James chapter 2. He doesn't have favorites. So, we shouldn't get funny about how He has distributed those gifts because He has given more to one and less to another.

That's not saying that they're His favorite and they're not. We shouldn't get grumpy because we don't want the gifts that He's given us, or envious because we do want what He's given others. That is the height of pride. Imagine on Christmas Day, someone gives you a gift, and you open it up, and you say, huh, that's not great. And you look over at the gift that they give to someone else, and you hate that person who's got that gift because they got something better, or something that you wanted that was different. It's incredibly proud and self-serving.

Nor, by the way, should you feel guilty for the gifts that you've been given because the envious person wants you to feel that way. God gives the gifts, and His blessing is never, never, never a cause for guilt. Envy and covetousness drive so much of the cultural agenda today because it is

driven by my desires. And that is the pride, verse 6, that God opposes. Do you see? God opposes the pride. That is why friendship with the world, living according to these values, is enmity with God. He opposes that kind of approach.

[16:53] That's a personal level if we think a bit further up. This is an important reminder, again, I think, for how the church engages with the world. Do you remember at the beginning of the series, I talked about the fact that we now live in the negative world. We live at a time in a culture where to be Christian is viewed negatively, and we're seen, some describe it as being the bad guys in culture. It's not just that Christianity is a kind of neutral thing, but it is actually a negative force in the world. Well, how does the church engage in that context? James is rebuking here a persecuted church for how they have allowed their passions to rule their agenda for bringing about the peace and righteousness of God that they desire. So they've set out with good intentions.

They've just gone the wrong direction. And what they've done is they've followed the lead of the culture, a culture that pursues violence and anger to bring about their purposes, rather than waiting on God and following the example of the one who came to bring glory through suffering, the Lord Jesus.

They have forgotten, blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life. Chapter 1, verse 12. The crown of life which God has promised to those who love him. Remain steadfast under trial. Stand the test. Wait for the crown in God's time.

James' hearers haven't done that. They've decided instead to adopt the methods of those around them to try and achieve godly ends with worldly means. Now, in our day, I think it is unlikely. I hope it's unlikely we'll be tempted to show our affection for the world by conspiring to murder our enemies.

But at a time, let's be honest, where holding traditional Christian views makes you unacceptable, where you get canceled for saying what the Bible says, where you face injustice and persecution because you just want to live out your Christian faith. That's all you're doing. Everybody else is living out their faith, even the faith they say they don't have. They live out according to their worldview.

[19:02] You're just trying to do that. And you get persecuted for it. When that happens, the temptation to let our passions take over and to fight back in ways that violate what James is saying in this letter is significant. Favoring the rich and powerful in order to gain favor for the gospel. Employing heated rhetoric designed to destroy our opponents. Look at so much of the Christian discourse online today. What is it if it is not that? Trying to win against opponents of the gospel using their methods. This is how the world operates. And James couldn't be clearer. He says it's spiritual adultery.

I think there are times when we get so frustrated, we get so downcast about the state of things in our culture. We're seeking to be obedient to Christ. And it just seems that yet again, another thing has happened and it makes it harder and harder and harder for us. And it is more and more destructive for people to live in the culture. And we just wonder whether the reason that the wicked seem to prosper and the righteous suffer is because the wisdom of the world is actually the right approach to take. If we adopted their methods in the name of Christ, maybe that would be the right thing to do.

James says to do that as spiritual adultery. But we do feel the pull of these desires. We feel them in our hearts, in ourselves. The world looks and feels impressive. The world looks strong and it is alluring. And it's a bit like a fish hook in the cheek. We get dragged along. So, what do we do? Well, we really need to look again at verse 6.

Look at verse 6, and I want to suggest there is some delightful news there for us. Verse 5, God speaks of His jealousy for us. He hates our spiritual adultery because He has called us to Himself. He has wedded Himself to us and He yearns jealously for our affection. Verse 6, but He gives more grace. Therefore, it says, God opposes the proud, yes, but gives grace to the humble.

So, all is not lost. As we feel that strong pull, that bias, as it were, in the base of our hearts that always seems to pull us in the wrong direction. James says what we should really do. Verse 7, submit yourselves, 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.

[ 21 : 50 ] Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you. We need to submit ourselves to God. We need to get our lives back under His rule, ordered according to His Word. We need to have our desires ordered rightly, and we need to embrace the pattern that Jesus left us to follow. So, that means a number of things.

At the fundamental level, it means we need to repent. Do you see the language? It was just, it was so grief-laden, wasn't it? Be wretched, mourn, weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning, your joy to gloom. We need to repent. We need to humble ourselves before God. We need to recognize, confess, yes, I think that way. I do those things. I have those desires. I have been the cause of the conflict in this relationship. And we need to mourn over that. We need to take it seriously and pass it away. We don't stop and not pass over it. It's not okay to say it's them.

It's always them. It's always them. To point the finger all the time. We need to get ourselves out of the way and humble ourselves before the Lord. That isn't just a one-time thing.

It is a posture for every day and how we should think about our life all the time, for that matter. Repentance is a whole life thing. Repentance involves resisting the devil's lure to pursue earthly wisdom in these things. Repentance looks like leaning into the heavenly wisdom of peacemaking and gentle mercy towards others, 3, 17 and 18. We need to admit that the problems that exist around us, we have a part to play in that, and we need to confess it to God.

But there are three positive outcomes when we do this. Do you see? Look what he says. Resist the devil. Resist the temptation to go in a particular direction that is away from God, and he will flee from you. When you resist the devil, he will flee from you. When you resist the temptation to covet and fight and quarrel when you submit to God, Satan will get on his bike. He won't leave you permanently.

[ 24 : 25 ] He'll look for another time to get you. But in that moment, and life is lived in moment by moment by moment, making the right decision moment by moment by moment, and in that moment, he'll flee, and he won't have caused you to sin. And it is one battle won. One battle won, one at a time. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Number nine, verse nine, draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Isn't that a beautiful promise? Go to God. When you're convicted of your sin, often God is the last place that you want to go because you feel so guilty, so you don't have because you don't ask. You feel guilty. You don't think, I can go to God in this state, and so you don't. And all that does, it exacerbates the problem. We must go to God. Draw near to Him. He is the one place where we can receive grace and restoration, and where He responds by drawing near to you.

When you fall, when you sin in some way, when you get caught up in some kind of conflict, and everything feels twisted up in your heart, coming to church is often the last thing you feel like doing. You feel guilty. You feel shame because of your sin, but it is the one place where you need to be.

[ 25 : 55 ] We come near to God, as one author has said, we come near to God to worship Him, to serve Him, to meet Him, to seek Him, and to gain assurance. And God responds in each case with His presence.

You draw near to Him, He will draw near to you. He is here now. He is with us. He is speaking to you. Draw near to God. He'll draw near to you. Verse 10, humble yourself. Humble yourselves before the Lord.

And what is the promise? He will exalt you. Get lower before the Lord. This is where we follow the example of the Lord Jesus. We do what Jesus did.

You remember Philippians chapter 2? Though He was equal with God, the very Son of God Himself, He did not consider that a thing to be clung on to. He didn't consider it a thing to be insisted upon, a right to be demanded. Instead, He emptied Himself by becoming a servant. The King of glory wrapped in a towel, washing people's feet. The Sovereign of heaven receiving the spit and blows of those He created.

And then He humbled Himself even further to death. And not just any death, to the cursed death of the cross. The most humiliating, disgraceful, disgusting, appalling death that there was.

[ 27 : 33 ] Now, we know that bit. We know that glorious aspect of the hymn. But what happens as a result of that humiliation? Paul says, therefore. You see that connection? Because He humbled Himself to the lowest place, God has highly exalted Him. The exaltation follows the humiliation. God has given Him the name that is above every name, simply because He humbled Himself to the Father, because He accepted the trials and the suffering. Because of His humiliation, Jesus is

exalted to the place of honor. And as it was for the Lord Jesus, so it is for us. When you put yourself at the Lord's feet, whatever trials He has given you, those trials are on a clock. And one day, in His time, those trials will cease, and you will be exalted.

You will be where Christ is. You will be lifted up to the place of glory with Him. And again, James is reminding us what the Lord Jesus said. Words that would be ringing in the ears of some of these people. This is a reminder, Luke 18, 14, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.

God opposes the proud, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. He gives grace to the humble. You can't choose whether or not you're going to face trials in this life, but you can choose how to respond. And the choice is fighting the way the world fights, because your desires aren't being met, because you're not getting what you want. You can go that way, or you can go the way of Christ.

Submit yourself to God's wise providence. Refuse the wisdom of the world. Cleanse yourself of its corrupting influence and draw near to Christ. He walked the same road ahead of you, and His example assures you that however low we get today, however low you go, one day, you will be exalted. Let's pray.

Let's pray.