

Wisdom and Warnings: The Book of James

What Causes Quarrels?

James 4:1-3

Mark Vroegop

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. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions (James 4:1–3).

I once heard a happily married couple say that the real test of marriage is whether or not you can wallpaper together. Now if you are not married or if you've never tried to wallpaper with someone, you can probably intuitively understand why they would make this statement.

Taking massive sheets of paper, applying adhesive, cutting around trim, and removing all the bubbles can be extraordinarily challenging. It can be frustrating. It often leads to arguments.

Sarah and I wallpaper quite well together. It's moving things—anything—that causes conflict. It's probably our height difference—after all, the angle of anything is going to tip her way. But it's more than that. Our movements aren't in sync. I've got good calluses. Thankfully my wife doesn't. What's more, we don't think the same way about how best to get something through a door. It's crazy.

We have so much harmony in most areas of our marriage. But when we try to work together to move something, bad stuff happens. Last weekend we had a stupid conflict as I was moving an umbrella to our back patio. The entire conflict related to whether she should open the door before or after I passed by. I shot her a look. She shot a look back at me. We didn't say anything, but there was conflict.

It didn't take long for us to resolve it, and we found ourselves laughing at our historical stupidity.

We've often found ourselves asking, "What is it about moving things together that does this!?" Honestly, it's not the height difference, the absence of calluses, or our different spatial assessment. There's something more there.

Conflicts come from somewhere. But where?

That one example is small in comparison to other conflicts in life. I'm sure you've found yourself wondering why there's so much conflict in your life, in your relationships, in the church, and in the world.

Certainly, the last year has shown us this clearly. I've never experienced a season of life where I've seen more unbridled conflict, competing agendas, slanderous comments, and problems that are lose/lose. In the last two weeks, I've spent time with about twenty pastors from all over the country and various denominations. Name the subject: COVID protocols, masks, in-person vs. online worship, racial reconciliation and justice, politics, or which media outlet to trust. Conflict is everywhere.

And it's exhausting. In some cases, devastating.

I know more pastors who've moved up their retirement date, considered leaving pastoral ministry, or who are even deeply questioning their ability to continue.

James was no stranger to conflict, and the first three verses of chapter four help us to diagnose what's underneath. In chapter three, James moved from talking about words to wisdom. Now, he addresses some of the root problems.

What causes quarrels? Three things: (1) misplaced affections, (2) unbridled frustrations, and (3) manipulative pride.

Let's look at each of these so that we can get a better understanding of where quarrels come from and what we can do about them.

1) Misplaced Affections

Verse one begins with an important question. I'm sure it's familiar to you: "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" As my opening illustration mentioned, I've asked myself this question many times—both about myself and what I see in others. James is going to help us consider what role our affections, passions, or what we love play into conflicts.

First, however, he starts with this question, and it shouldn't be surprising. This book of James is written to a group of Christians who are experiencing various kinds of trials and a testing of their faith (1:2-3). They are trying to navigate their way through hardship and opposition. We get that.

But what we might not realize with the book of James is where the opposition is coming from. You might have approached chapter one thinking that the "various trials and testing of your faith" mostly related to things outside the church. Perhaps you quickly think about circumstances that create a trial like a famine, a health issue, or a natural disaster. Or maybe you think about opposition from people with governmental authority and power. When you think about trials, I would suspect that you might initially think about these things.

While those things might be true, it's interesting how much time James talks about their response to each other in this book. The outside pressure created an internal testing. That's why he talks about partiality (2:1-7), loving our neighbors (2:9-13), sins of the tongue (3:1-5), blessing and cursing (3:6-12), and wisdom from above (3:13-18). His focus in chapters 3-4 is inside the church—among believers.

Of course, this applies to our response to situations outside the body of Christ. But chapter four is particularly geared toward the relationship among people who claim to wear the same jersey. If you skip ahead to 4:11 you'll see this clearly:

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 (James 4:11).

When James uses words like “quarrels” and “fights” he means between people who are supposed to love each other. Both words represent verbal combat and contention. It's hard to make a big distinction between these words. He probably wants to highlight quarrels among individuals and fighting between factions of people within the church.

It's important to make nuanced observations. First, not all conflict is necessarily bad. Some Christians think that if there is any disagreement or controversy, that something terrible has happened. It's important to remember that much of the New Testament was written because of conflict, and we have good examples of strong disagreement without sinfulness. We also have examples where division was not only right but necessary.

Secondly, some conflicts should be completely ignored. Paul told Titus to avoid “foolish controversies. . .and quarrels about the law” (Titus 3:9).

Third, most of the biggest conflicts in the church came from people who used religious-sounding language to hide other motives. The religious leaders during the time of Jesus and the early Church were guilty of this. Second Timothy was the last letter Paul wrote, and it's remarkable how much he said about conflict. One example:

They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that! They are the kind who work their way into people's homes and win the confidence of vulnerable women who are burdened with the guilt of sin and controlled by various desires (2 Tim. 3:5–6, NLT).

I share all of this because of the importance of what follows in the text. It's hard to determine which conflicts to engage, which to avoid, what's good controversy, and what's bad. But one thing that all of us can evaluate is this statement from James: *Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?* (James 4:1b).

Conflict is prevalent because conflicts involve passions. Sinful quarrels and fights are caused by misplaced affections. We fight because of what we love. The word for passion translates from the Greek

word “hedone.” It’s a word that “carries the negative connotations of sinful, self-indulgent pleasure.”¹ It’s interesting how this word is used elsewhere:

- Luke 8:14 – In the parable of the sower, it’s used for the bad soil marked by the pleasures of life.
- Titus 3:3 – For the kind of selfish pursuits that marked life prior to conversion.
- 2 Peter 2:13 – For the pleasures connected to sinful, worldly parties.

Much of our sinful conflicts arise because of what we want, what we desire, or what we love. And the challenge is that we are often not considering what lies underneath our sinful quarreling and fights. So, one of the most effective things that you can do and probably the main point of this text is to simply ask yourself this question: “What do I want right now?” Asking this question not only provides clarity, but also helps remind you about how much your affections (what you love) affect our conflicts.

Sometimes the issue is that we love the wrong things. At other times we love the right things but we love them too much. Let me give you a few examples:

- We love being appreciated, affirmed, or given credit
- We love not having people tell us what to do or question our judgment
- We love not being bothered by inconveniences or having to adjust our lifestyle
- We love things being clear, easy, and understandable
- We love being comfortable, feeling safe, and predictability
- We love being in control and feeling like we have choices
- We love having fun, being at rest, and enjoying life

Most of these things aren’t inherently sinful. Many of them are good things and are gifts from God. But they can also create misplaced affections. And it’s easy not even think about our passions and what we love.

When I think back on the conflict with the umbrella, do you know what I want? I love myself so much that I want my wife to know what I’m thinking without having to say anything. Being a Christian means that my heart has been changed by Jesus. I not only have new desires and new affections, but I’m also “affection-aware.” It’s like the old hymn says:

Oh, to grace how great a debtor
daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy goodness, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to thee:
prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;

¹ Douglas J. Moo, [*James: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 176.

here's my heart, O take and seal it;
seal it for thy courts above.²

Where do quarrels come from? When the hearts of Christians wander with misplaced affections.

2) Unbridled Frustrations

The second reason that James lists moves from motivations to actions. He wants us to understand that it's not just the desires; it's our posture toward our desires. We fail to realize that our desires are going to lead us toward an action. If that action is frustrated or hindered, it's likely that we'll escalate – sinfully.

The battleground relates to unbridled or unrestricted frustrations. In other words, what you love is one issue. But the other issue is how you respond when you don't get what you want.

James lists two examples in verse two:

“You desire and do not have, so you murder.” James points out that the gap between what we want and our ability to get it creates devastating actions. He's talking here about the sin of envy or jealousy. Do you realize that those sin issues are merely the next step after misplaced affections?

It goes like this: Our affections are misplaced. Our thinking is unchecked. Our actions seem justified. When we're disappointed or hindered, we escalate. And the result is that we are capable of saying things that are destructive and doing things unimaginable. A few examples:

If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation... Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish (John 11:48, 50).

For {Pilate} perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up (Mark 15:10).

But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy (Acts 5:17).

Just think about how much conflict happens because of our desire for things to be the way that we want them. Think about how easy it is for us to feel defensive, threatened, and protective. Think how strong our “wants” are and what we are willing to do and say to get them. Think of the things you've said or done or written or posted that were really based on what you wanted. Think of how much hate and how much pain emerges from unbridled frustrations.

Dr. Brent Aucoin says, “We do what we do because we want what we want.” There's more.

² https://hymnary.org/text/come_thou_fount_of_every_blessing

“You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.” Another angle on this is not just what we want, but what we think we need. Coveting is simply desiring what you don’t have. Sometimes it can be what someone else has: “I wish I had a car like that.” At other times coveting can be desiring something that you believe you need: “I want to know that my job is safe.” Coveting is how we sinfully deal with the gaps in life. It can be anything that is powerful: money, titles, possessions, influence, affirmation, or recognition.

The fighting and quarreling are just our way of battling for limited resources. This battle is a war that rages in our hearts, and we have to continually ask ourselves what do we want and why do we want it. Tim Keller in *The Reason for God* says, “The real culture war is taking place inside our own disordered hearts, wracked by inordinate desires for things that control us, that lead us to feel superior and exclude those without them, and that fail to satisfy us even when we get them.”³

Why would a gospel-centered community be different? Because Jesus has not only changed our affections, but he’s also satisfied us in himself. The community of believers reminds us about that as we gather together. As we sing together, pray together, give together, and learn together we’re reminded that our identity isn’t found in what we have or don’t have. We’re exhorted to trust in God’s provision and not use sinful anger to get what we want. We’re reminded that life in Jesus is what truly satisfies. And we’re reminded that doing things his way is the best way.

Rather than being frustrated, we walk by faith.

3) Manipulative Pride

Affections and frustrations are part of the problem underneath our conflicts. But there’s another one. It’s manipulative pride.

Here’s how it appears in the fourth chapter of James: *You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions* (James 4:2–3).

At first, you might think that these verses are about prayer. After all, prayer is at the center of what James is talking about here. Three times he uses the word “ask.” So, he has prayer in mind at some level. But the issue isn’t the prayer; the issue is the posture of the heart of the person in mind.

Notice that James rebukes them because they don’t pray and because they pray with wrong motives. So the issue isn’t so much about prayer as it is about pride.

In the first case, he says that they don’t have because they don’t ask. At one level, this means that God is ready to help them and provided what is needed or even desired. But at another level, this prayerless is revealing because God is not on the minds of his people. The first problem is that they don’t even think to pray.

³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God – Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

This gets to the heart of the issue with wars and fights. We're so busy thinking and striving about what we want that we never ask what God wants. We're so angry about what other people are doing and we're so busy using the "dark arts" to get what we want, that God's will and his grace are far from our minds. One of the sure signs of sinful conflict and controversy is the absence of people seeking the face of God. Our pride persuades us that we don't need God's help. And when we think and live this way, we are simply godless.

The second way that this gets the best of us is that even if we do pray, it affects the legitimacy of our prayers. When we pray this way, we don't want God's will. We want him to give us what we want. And our motivation isn't for God's glory. When we pray this way, we want to use God to give us what we want. One commentator says this:

In this refusal to humble themselves in prayer, they only show how lacking they are in the most basic traits of Christian wisdom and how driven they are by worldly wisdom (3:15). Instead of asking God, they become so insistent with one another that they quarrel and fight, trying to extract what they envy from the other.⁴

Our pride can be so bad that it even affects how we treat the sacred discipline of prayer. We'll murder or try to manipulate God. This is serious!

If you are not yet a Christian, perhaps this message is showing you the need for a change so deep that it's calling you to consider trusting in Jesus. Every Christian comes to faith after they realize their need. I hope you are coming to that place in light of what this text says.

Now this is where this message could be really helpful. If you are a follower of Jesus and your heart has been transformed by God's grace, ask yourself these questions when you feel conflict starting to emerge:

- What do I love?
- Why am I so frustrated?
- Where might pride be involved?

Just think about how those questions could have helped me with the umbrella. What do I love? Moving things quickly and without extra effort. Why am I frustrated? Because my wife should be able to read my mind. Where might pride be involved? Because my way of moving things is best.

Do you see how awful this is? It's embarrassing.

This is where quarrels come from! Help us, Lord!

⁴ Kurt A. Richardson, [James](#), vol. 36, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 176–177.

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