

Jas18 – What Causes Church Conflict? James 4:1-3

Pastor Dave Shepardson Calvary Chapel Nuevo / www.wordbymail.com

Open your Bibles. Open your eyes, open your hearts and open your minds. Title of the message this morning “What Causes Church Conflict?” We are moving to James Chapter 4 from Chapter 3. We are doing all of the first three verses.

A young daughter had some friends over to play out in the backyard, and from inside the dad heard all these little girls yelling and screaming at each other in a group. So he ran into the backyard to stop it and his daughter says, “Daddy. We’re just playing church.”

The commentator Douglas Moo, a well respected famous commentator, he quotes in his commentary on James a Jewish philosopher named Spinoza, from the 17th Century ***“I have often wondered that persons who make boast of professing the Christian religion—namely love, joy, peace, temperance, and charity to all men—should quarrel with such rancorous animosity and display daily towards one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than the virtues which they profess, is the readiest criteria of their faith.”***

Christians – who boast of love, joy, peace, and patience (to name a few) – quarreling and fighting so much this becomes a notable sign of their faith. We are known more for our fighting and our hypocrisy than we are for the love of Christ. It ought not to be so.

This message James moves to his next exhortation with these words, ***What is causing the quarrels and fights among you?***

Do you want to know what really causes the quarrels and fights among us? DO you want to know? Do you have the courage to know? If we know the source we will know better how to respond.

Let’s pray. *Heavenly Father we are willing right now we say Lord we do want to know. We’ve been part and we’ve been victim. We’ve taken part in quarrels and fighting, we’ve been victims of quarrels and fighting and we’ve been used by the powers of hell to do damage to other Christians and to the church and to the name of Christ and the cause of Christ by being drawn in to quarrels and fighting in church. God forbid it in us! And we pray today that you would begin by showing us the cause, the source. Where does this come from? Reveal it to us clearly and use it Lord to motivate us to a correct response, we pray in Jesus’ name, amen.*

Last message we found out the source of the “wisdom” (opinion) that someone is pushing on us can be easily discovered. James went through that last week and he said if you will

just watch what you see and listen to what you hear, you will be able to determine the source of the wisdom (so called) that is being dumped on you by another Christian, whether it is from above or from below. It was really a pretty simple test, if you didn't just listen or watch the message, and please for the sake of Christ, get the message so that you will be able to say, "You know what pal? All the signs say that opinion you're pouring on me is from hell."

In a similar way we can know the source of the quarreling and fighting that goes on in the church that we either see or are involved with. It's a huge black eye on the testimony of the church. It's despicable. It's the despicable trinity of me, myself and I.

So how do we make sense of it? How do we decide who is right in a quarrel? Which side do I take? Proverbs says *The way of a man seems right until his adversary speaks*. The first person who talks to you always seems right until you hear the other side of the story. And so we get caught up with who's right and who's wrong and what side should I take? Those are all horrible ways to approach quarreling and fighting in church. Those are the wrong questions. The only right question is "What is the source of the quarreling and fighting and bickering and complaining and criticizing that's rampant in the church?" What's the source? Is this from God? Because if we can know the source then we can know better how to respond to it.

Ready or not James is going to identify the source of the quarreling and fighting we experience in the church.

James 4:1 (ESV)

1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

Notice doesn't say "their" passions are at war within "them." It says "your" passions are at war within "you." Two rhetorical questions to make one point clear. Here's the point in case you missed reading it. *The source of the quarrels and fighting that you experience in church ... is your own passions that are at war within you.*

It's you. The problem is me. This is you talking, "The problem is me." Every Christian that I have ever tried to assist out of quarreling, backbiting, slander and all the stuff that goes with it, every one of them that I know of would say first thing, "Nope. No chance. Absolutely not! There is no way it's my fault! It's somebody's fault, but there is no way that this has anything to do with me! Certainly it's the other person's fault; certainly it's that leadership's fault. And that pastor, it's definitely his fault. But my fault? Not a chance!"

Are you that sure? Are you that sure that it's not your fault? Because if you are sure, then you are in direct conflict with the Word of God. And so if you want to go toe to toe with God and say, "No God. I know better than you. It's not my fault." |

Because God is saying, gently, "It's yours. Own it. It's your own passions that are at war within you. The quarreling and the fighting that you are involved in church is coming from inside you!!!"

It's not the church's problem; it's not the fault of the church. It's the fault of the people and if you're involved in the quarreling and fighting God says it's what is inside you that is causing it. That's what God says. So, you can take it up with him.

Listen to the NLT's translation – it doesn't help you any...

James 4:1 (NLT)

1 What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you

The NLT uses even stronger and more descriptive language. The source of the quarrels and fights you get into at church come from the **evil desires at war within you.**

What is it with James and this evil within me thing? Every time we turn around James is telling us we are battling with an evil sin nature inside us; which really blows our minds because we were thinking we were pretty holy and above reproach. James is telling us our sin nature is in us and it is at war in us. James is telling us our sin nature is evil and it is easily coerced by the powers of hell to damage other Christians and to damage entire churches. Over and over and over again. (I'm not teaching this because it's happening here; I'm teaching this because it's the next verse.)

Our sin nature is easily coerced by the enemy. This is a shock. This is a news flash. This is a shock to most Christians... "What do you mean? What are you saying the enemy can use me?" I know you think you're righteous and perfect in every way, but you're not. You're a sinner. And your nature is black, ugly and makes itself available to the enemy. And if you're not daily crucifying that sin nature it will rise up and be used by the enemy, not only against you but against those around you.

The Greek word translated evil desires in the NLT and passions in the ESV is **HEDONE** (HE-DOE-NAY) It's the word we get hedonism from. Hedonism, at its core, *is the desire to please self.* Hedonism makes "pleasing self" the highest purpose in life. There's something in you called "self" and it demands to be pleased. You both crucify it and allow Christ to live in you, or you quarrel and fight to please "self." Hedonism. Most

often it is described as seeking pleasure and so we connect it to cultures like Las Vegas. But at the very core it's the desire to please self. It's in us. We have to keep taking the antidote, the Holy Spirit. We have to keep crucifying that spirit of hedonism in us or it comes out and it's used by the enemy to destroy.

Let's read it again. When I do this it's because I want it to stick. It's very easy to read something once and then go on and never change. Most of us have read James 4:1. But still the fighting and quarreling and arguing and slander and backbiting and despicable evilness is rampant in the church. So all I can do is keep sharing it with you and trust that you be open to the Word of God.

The New Century Version (NCV) says this:

James 4:1 (NCV)

I Do you know where your fights and arguments come from? They come from the selfish desires that war within you.

Do you know where the fights and arguments you're having with people in church come from? They come from the selfish desires at war within *you*. Within me. Within each one of us individually. "Are you saying that these battles I have to take out that leader, that pastor, those people are coming from my own selfish desires?"

Yeah. I am. I am not sure how many other ways I can say it.

This is coming from inside you. It's coming from inside your heart. And you're damaging the cause of Christ with it. Be afraid! We claim to be Christians yet we are working for the enemy. God's mercy is new every day.

The quarrels, arguments and fighting that you are having in church are coming from the selfish, evil desires and passions that are at war within *YOU* ... not that other person. If we will just accept God's Word here as it is written, then we'll be well on our way to being transformed into having a much more peaceful life in the body of Christ

How in the world do Christians live their whole life under the Word of God and never change. How is it that we came into church twenty years ago, causing fights and conflicts and all kinds of negative stuff, and we go out twenty years later doing the exact same thing? Because we were never willing to cry out, "God, that's me!!!" Forgive me! Heal me! I repent from that, I want a new heart. My heart is full of the flesh of selfish desires. Lord I want to crucify that."

Once you accept this it gives you clarity when you see it. Because then, when we start to get sucked in to those quarrels, arguments and fights at church we can say, “Oh. I know where this comes from. I think I’ll pass.”

Isn’t the Book of James unique? The Book of James is unique in the New Testament. Here’s how it is unique. James’ purpose as a pastor and the purpose of his book is to rattle us. It’s to wake us up. He’s the guy that leaves the mark (the two by four mark on the side of our head.) We’re like, “How can I not accept that?” It’s so clear and it’s so strong. The Book of James, like no other book in the New Testament, is a mirror. If we refuse to ever look into a mirror we will never realize just how much of our sin nature is showing.

Notice James is not saying some of us. He is not saying, you know there are a few of you... He’s not saying some of the time. He is not saying there are some times when you’re involved in quarrels and fighting... He is saying *WHEN* you find yourself in quarrels and fights...this is why. It is because of evil, selfish desires and passions that are at war within you. Period.

The good news, if you are a Christian, at least you are at war with your sin nature. If you didn’t have the life of Christ in you, you would be saying “I love this. This is fun. I don’t have any problem with this. This is what I do. This is what I’m made to do.”

But because Jesus Christ is in you, (and if you’re not at war with this, check to see if you’re in the faith. Ask God, “Hey is the Holy Spirit in there? Because I’m not doing anything but damage to the cause of Christ.”) and you catch yourself, like I have, and say to yourself that you just got sucked in to a quarrel, into an argument, into a fight, and then you know there’s a battle going on in your heart.

We are certain that the Bible teaches the assurance of salvation. The work that Jesus Christ has begun in you, he will complete it. You have been saved by his grace and through your faith alone with no works added. You are his workmanship, his **POIEMA**, and you’ve been created in Christ Jesus for good works. It’s a done deal. Read Ephesians Chapter 1 and believe it. It’s a done deal.

However, the war is won. The battle, not so much. Sometimes I find myself leaving a meeting or ending a phone call and think, “Oh I lost that one. I’m so sorry Lord.” And I do my best to communicate that to the person that I lost that battle with and say I’m sorry I lost it there. At least we are fighting right? That’s the good news. It is a battle; James recognizes it’s a battle. Here is encouragement. Let’s start winning a few. I used to get

sucked into every argument, every fight. The devil used to use me for all kinds of terrible things inside the church. At least I'm winning a few now. He's not taking me out so easy.

Write these verses down in your margin next to James 4:1. You study them on your own. It will give you some motivation to keep this in your heart and be transformed. Write down Romans 7:21-25. Paul says "I find that there is a war within me. That I desire to do good, but there is another source in me that does bad." And Paul says "I recognize I am at war". And then at the end he says "Thank God that the victory is through Jesus Christ." And then he goes into Romans Chapter 8, "This is the victory that you walk in the Spirit."

Prior to Romans, Paul says in Galatians 5:16-17 "Walk in the Spirit and you will not gratify the lusts of the flesh." I'm not talking sexual stuff. I am talking about your lust for self-centered desires in the church. Your lust for selfish desires that cause the arguments and the fighting in your church. "Why didn't I get to do that? Why did they do that? How come I can't...?" Etc. Those are selfish desires. Galatians 5:16 says "Walk in the Spirit and you won't satisfy the lusts of the flesh." And then in verse 17 it says "Because the Spirit lusts (or wars) against the flesh. And the flesh wars against the Spirit." And then it continues on about what not only does it look like, but how to win.

Get in the war. Get in the battle. Get on the playing field and start playing. Here's what it looks like. You crucify the flesh. You walk in the Spirit. That's the "game." That's the game, like you're not in the dugout anymore. Like God's actually got you on the playing field. Here's what it looks like. You're crucifying your flesh. And you are walking in the power of the Holy Spirit in every relationship you have, in every area of your life, that's the battle. Let's win some!

James identified the cause and the source and now he is going to show us the consequence of our self-focused sin nature, this fleshly attitude.

James 4:2(a-b) (ESV)

2 You desire and do not have, so you murder.

You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel . . .

The English phrasing of this verse is difficult, because the original Greek had basically no punctuation marks. But of the thirteen Bible translations I use, ten of them follow the grammar of the ESV. And ALL the translations really have the same meaning. ***You desire and do not have, so you murder***

Yikes! What does that mean? First of all, it seems like James is trying to make a strong point.

One commentator said - *“The word [MURDER] is startling and was meant to startle; James sought to force his readers to realize the depth of the evil in their bitter hatred toward others”*

James is trying to rock our world, in order for us to say, “I think I ought not to live like that anymore, that would be the best bet.” When we find ourselves in quarrels and fights in the church it’s not a good sign about what is going on inside the church or inside our hearts.

Here is how the NLT puts the verse statement of verse 2.

James 4:2(a) NLT

2 You want what you don’t have, so you scheme and kill to get it.

Again, yikes! Most scholars agree James is using the word “kill” (or murder) here *metaphorically* even using it as *hyperbole* (an on purpose dramatization to get a point across.)

But if you think James is trying to shake us up about what’s in our heart, listen to what the beloved Apostle John says.

1John 3:15 (NLT)

15 Anyone who hates another brother or sister is really a murderer at heart. And you know that murderers don’t have eternal life within them.

Double yikes! How can we continue to quarrel and fight and hate other Christians and think that we are really “okay with God?” This is a mirror and it is showing all of the imperfections. If these verses are describing us, we are *not okay* with God. We all get caught up in this, and when we do it’s because of evil, selfish desires in our own heart. We need some serious heart surgery.

God wants to heal us, God wants to transform us. He wants to give us new life that is not controlled by our self-centered fleshly desires. We need to be transformed into the image of Christ. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says he’ll do it. But, we have to start with the mirror (that’s me) come to him in confession (I agree with you God that sin is in my heart) and repentance (I commit to turn from that sin and walk away from it and walk towards God) and then a continual walking in the Spirit offering all that we are as a living sacrifice to

be consumed by God, and being transformed by the renewing of our mind by living in his Word in order to start that transformation.

So the beginning of James 4:2 said *You desire and do not have, so you murder.* (or hate like murder.) The second half of James 4:2 says the following.

James 4:2(b) (ESV)

2 . . . You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel . . .

The word translated COVET means: *strong envy and resentment against someone*

You have strong envy and resentment against someone but you cannot obtain what you want, so you fight and quarrel. No commentary needed.

Let's be honest. Most of us would say, "No way! I don't do that. I don't fight and quarrel because I don't get what I want..."

Yeah, you actually do. You've been doing it since you were in your terrible two's. You still do it because the sin nature is still in you. You really *want* something. You *can't* get it. So you *fight and quarrel*, damaging everyone around you, including yourself. But if you will just allow the Word of God to be your mirror, to pierce your heart, you can see it, confess it, repent of it, and you crucify your flesh and you get filled with the Holy Spirit and get healed! That's good news!

But then, let's look at the third thought in James 4:2

James 4:2(c) (ESV)

2 . . . You do not have, because you do not ask.

Does that mean that all I have to do is ask that my self-centered desires get fulfilled and God will fulfill them? Is that what that means? No that is not what it means. We have to understand the context in order to understand what this means, and going back to the word we get HEDONISM from really helps.

The NKJV translates this word very well. NKJV says in James 4:1 – the wars and fights you experience in church- come from *your DESIREs for pleasure.* That's the word we get HEDONISM from. All of your quarrels and fighting in church are from you trying to get something you think you need. It all comes from a *desire to satisfy* something in your life. But you're getting what you really want. What you really want is a sense of fulfillment, peace and happiness and all your self-centered fleshly struggles are not going to bring it. You don't have fulfillment or peace or happiness because you're looking for it in all the wrong places. You don't have it because you're not asking God for it. Instead

you are fighting and struggling in your own flesh for it. If you would stop all sinful striving in your own effort and start asking God to give you true fulfillment and peace, he would do it, and you would have it. Acknowledge that your acceptance is in God, that your peace is in God, and that your relationship is in God. And he is the one who satisfies your needs. But you don't have it, because instead of depending on God, you're allowing your selfish desires to win the battle that's going on within you.

Instead of turning to God as the giver of every good and perfect gift, we're fighting to try to satisfy what *we think* we need. Instead of crucifying our flesh and truly looking to God, we're wrestling and struggling and fighting to try and get what our selfish desires are demanding.

And, when we are in this self-focused mode, even when we do ask God, we don't receive from him because we are asking with the wrong motive.

James 4:3 (ESV)

3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

There's our word again, **HEDONE** (HE-DOE-NAY) – **Hedonism** – the desire to please self. How many prayers are motivated by the desire to please self? I need this, I want this, and the list goes on and on. When we do pray, we pray out of the same selfish desires and when we pray with those same motives, we should not expect to receive *anything* from God.

Here's one of the truths I often explain to Christians – God is NOT our genie. He is not chillin' in the lamp, waiting for you to have him pop out and give you whatever you demand from him. That's not God. That's the false God of the false teachers who are feeding your self-centered desires in their teaching. These "teachers" give us this feeling that if we just pray enough, or have enough faith, or if we just "sow seed" into their ministry then we will get what we ask God for. If your HEDONISM (your desire to please self) is motivating your prayers to God, then he would be a terrible God if he were to give you what you want for you to spend it on your selfish desires.

Remember this God is the great giver of gifts, the great giver of life.

James 1:17 (ESV)

17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

God wants to answer your prayers – with good and perfect gifts. That is who he is. He truly wants what is best for you. The problem, very often, is that what we think is best for

us, is not. If our selfish desires are winning the battle inside us between the flesh and the Spirit, then we'll be struggling and fighting and even praying that God would give us our selfish desires.

If we would just say to God, "Every good and perfect gift comes from you. You want to give me what you know is best, Lord. And so that's what I want. I want what you know is best. I want what you know is best for me because I actually trust you as my Heavenly Father, even if what is best for me is not what I want."

How often have you prayed that? "God if what I want isn't best for me, don't give it to me, God. Don't give me what I want if it's going to hurt me. If me desiring that thing is just going to feed my sin nature, don't give it to me, Lord. Lord, break me of my pride and my self-centeredness and my desire to feed my own pleasure in everything I do. And Lord you give me what's best for me. You give me what's best for me."

And then you can stop struggling and fighting and stop being involved in the quarrels and the fights in church that are really just because of you trying to get what you want. And you stop all that. And you say "Lord, I'm going to seek you. I'm not going to seek what I want; I am going to seek you, as a person. I don't want that thing, that position; I don't want them to do this or that or what I think they should do. I want you Jesus. I want you and your good for me. I trust you, I believe you enough that you can bring what you know is best to pass in my life. That's what I want. That's what I want in this situation. I just want you to bring your best for me. I trust you for what that it."

Wow that's a radical change for about ninety-nine percent of Christians. Because we have been sinfully indoctrinated that we are able to demand what we want from God and he's obligated to give it to us. And if doesn't, we fight and kick and scratch and claw our way to get what we want anyway.

But if we would *seek him* instead of our selfish desires
if we would *seek to truly know him*
if we would *seek his good* for us instead of our own...

Then he will gladly pour out the greatest possible blessings we can know in this life.

Our Heavenly Father wants us to be truly blessed. Here's how to have him bless you. Acknowledge that you're a sinner. That it is sin in you that is causing this behavior, the fighting and the quarreling and the struggles that you're in, that's the sign that you're still a sinner. And so you have the opportunity to say, "God, save me. I'm not messing

around; I actually want to be changed. I want my black heart gone and I want a heart of flesh – I want your heart. I want to be transformed.”

But if we keep asking him for the poison of our selfish desires, then he will keep saying no, out of his love for us. But if we will do that, then God will give us his very best. And we will find out with Paul, whether I abound or am abased, whether I have plenty or suffering need, I can do all things (meaning I can go through any circumstance) through Christ.

Actually, my circumstances don't matter. I don't have to fight. I don't have to argue. I don't have to quarrel. I can actually be at peace, because Jesus Christ is the source of my fulfillment. That's radical.

And if we keep quarreling and fighting in the church because of our self centered desires and wrong motives, we will never experience the true blessings of God, and we will just keep loaning our action to the powers of hell... and we will continue to damage the life transforming work of Jesus Christ in the church. Let's choose wisely.

Let's pray. *Heavenly Father, we are scared that our sin nature is still inside us. We know Lord that it is crucified; we know that positionally it is beaten permanently. It still affects us. We still have the choice to serve our sin nature. We see it. And we are scared. We don't want to serve our sin nature Lord. We aren't in this to go through the motions; we actually want to be transformed by you. We want to know that your life is living in us and we have eternal life. We are looking at our life right now and aren't so sure. We want your life to take over, Lord. Lord, we've given our life to you, but we recognize that the quarrels and fighting that exist are actually coming from the sin in our heart. We want to repent of that. We want to come to you just as we are, give you our sin and allow you to heal us and transform us.*” (And if you belong to the Lord and he is speaking to you, just pray something like this.) *“Lord I surrender. Give me clean hands and give me a clean heart. I repent of my sin. I confess to you Lord I have done damage, I've been used by the enemy. I've done damage to the name of Christ, and to the body of Christ, please forgive me Lord.*

(Some of you have never given your life to Jesus Christ. You have never made that initial commitment to invite him in. Today is the day. Just pray something like this.) *“Lord I believe, you've touched my heart. I believe. I need to receive you into my life. I need to be changed, I need to be forgiven, and I need to be transformed. Lord Jesus, save me. I deserve your judgment but I receive your grace. Please forgive me of my sin. Please*

come into my life, please give me your Holy Spirit and transform me. Make me a disciple. Thank you for saving me.”

Lord we resign ourselves right now to fight every battle against our own flesh. To fight every battle against our desire to please self. We stand before you right now and say Lord we will fight the effects of our flesh, we will daily crucify our flesh, we will daily take up our cross and follow you. We need your power. We need your Holy Spirit. We need the supernatural power to crucify our flesh and to walk in your Spirit. Please baptize me in your power. Immerse me in your power. Draw me to yourself Lord and give me your life. Thank you for saving me and reserving a place in heaven for me. I will worship you all my days. In Jesus' name, amen.”