

Conflict in Communication—James 3:1-4:12—8/30/2026
Copyright by Mark Vaughan 8/2026

For many years, some of the most helpful topics for my own soul & for others have been those I used to cover in premarital counseling.

I taught through those on Wednesdays 11 years ago & I need to review them more often now that Pastor Chris does premarital.

Some of the topics relate specifically to marriage, like the roles of husbands & wives & the purposes of marriage.

I taught on those purposes a year ago & I've been wanting to come back to share more of the other material ever since.

I have been especially wanting to share about communication.

So at least this week & next week, I will share some biblical wisdom about communication that I have learned from others.

Dr. Wayne Mack went to be with the Lord over two years ago, but his teaching left its imprint on me through the pastors of Grace Community Church & The Master's Seminary when I was there.

He wrote *Preparing for Marriage God's Way & Your Family God's Way* & biblical counseling homework manuals & more.

His work was so deeply thoughtful & extensive that it can be exhausting at times to study it all faithfully.

I am indebted to him & my former pastors over 25 years ago.

I've shared things & reminded myself so often that I have forgotten details to give credit to the trail of sources that impacted me.

But in this digital age when more interaction is through devices than in-person, we need such time-tested wisdom of Scripture.

Technological advances have brought many blessings, but they have also brought challenges & communication has surely suffered.

Because face to face communication is minimal for so many, it's like basic norms faded away or failed to be passed on.

Some things—like being aware of nonverbal communication—got lost in the self-absorption of isolation & its anxieties & angers.

I'll say more about nonverbal communication next week, but it's best not to focus first on social cues or speaking skills.

We first need to think about our hearts as the source of our words & as the control center for processing the words of others.

Many passages explain what Jesus summed up in Matthew 12:45: "*the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.*"

But this morning let's turn to the NT letter of James where we'll meditate a bit on the root of our communication struggles.

We're going to look at James 4 as one of my favorite passages to help me resolve conflict in my life & in counseling others.

But I want us to see it in its contextual focus on communication so we can highlight ways to help us grow in love & understanding.

As we walk through these sections, I'll offer 3 principles to frame our thinking about our relationships & communication.

So look at James 3 & let's begin by reading James 3:1-12. [READ]

The 1st takeaway to note today is from the big picture of these verses is 1st today, to realize the potential in communication.

Observation #1 to frame our need for communication in relationships for our good & for others, 1st realize the potential in communication.

When we read James 3:1-12 & see the dangerous potential of the tongue, we may be tempted to never want to speak.

We can all testify to the danger described here, where a word or phrase or conversation set off a host of reactions that spread like wildfire.

Kids—you know you have said things that provoked reactions in your brother or sister or mom or dad or friend, right?

And many times, the fiery reactions among kids are small compared to the destruction of words & ideas & influences from adults.

Yet it is obvious that we cannot simply stop speaking.

We must bless our Lord & Father—we must speak to God & we must speak about God & we must speak to others in serving God.

And even though this chapter begins with a warning for those who become teachers, we need teachers.

Teaching is a spiritual gift & it is commanded as a priority when the church gathers & it is also necessary for all of us in evangelism.

So when we read of the destructive potential of the tongue & how untamable it is, we must also value its potential for good.

To reach the goal, to be a mature man, as verse 2 means in that word for perfect, we can learn to communicate in ways that guide all of life.

Wise communication can steer life rightly like a ship's rudder.

Proverbs 10:11 says "*The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life*", & 10:21 says "*the lips of the righteous feed many*", & 10:31 says "*the mouth of the righteous flows with wisdom*."

We want such good fruit from our communication & should regularly be praying for the Spirit to help us with such wisdom.

We want to heal & not hurt, as Proverbs 12:18 says, "*There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, But the tongue of the wise brings healing*."

Similarly, Proverbs 12:25 says, "*Anxiety in a man's heart weighs it down, But a good word makes it glad*."

Proverbs 15:4 says, "*soothing tongue is a tree of life, But perversion in it crushes the spirit*" & 15:8 says, "*The lips of the wise spread knowledge, But the hearts of fools are not so.*"

Our communication has so much potential for good or evil.

With such possibility for blessing available, we dare not avoid it.

You & I cannot retreat from communication merely because it's hard or we've been hurt or misunderstood or whatever else.

We cannot make excuses like '*it's not my strength*' or '*not my thing*' or it's not what men or engineers or introverts do well.

You & I can pray for wisdom—as James 1 says—and expect God to give generously & without reproach.

We can pray as we 1st, realize the potential in communication.

Now let's keep reading in James 3:13-18. [READ]

After warning of the dangers of the tongue, James distinguishes the source from which our speech flows—from the heart.

Heart wisdom will be pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy & good fruits & impartial & without hypocrisy.

And the opposite will be jealousy & strife & selfish arrogance.

Peacemakers—those who love peace & restore relationships with righteous fruit—know that it all starts in the heart.

So we might note that they recognize the problem in conflict as a 2nd observation for us to take away from this section & into chapter 4.

We said 1st, to realize the potential in communication & now, point #2, to recognize the problem in conflict.

The end of James 3 sets up for the question & answer of James 4 where we must, #2 today, recognize the problem in conflict.

James 4 gives us the answer to the age-old question of why we all can't just get along, of why there is conflict in relationships.

This is review for many—& don't think you are why I'm teaching it—but it is so helpful for how we live each day that it's worth reviewing.

When couples struggle in marriage, when kids & parents have issues, when troubles arise in churches or neighborhoods or activities, we automatically want to pin the blame on someone.

We want to find that singular person or group who is at fault, that one instigator or troublemaker causing and exacerbating the problem.

Sometimes that may be true, but often more is in play.

We certainly can search out matters & ask hard questions to discern where change is needed, but we need to get to root desires in conflict.

If you want to know the reason we argue or get angry or bitter or react in other sinful ways, read James 4:1-2. [READ]

How can people with good desires—and maybe even godly desires in relationships as close as Christian marriage—get into conflict?

And then how can that conflict be addressed rightly?

It starts by seeing the motives behind our messes.

And I don't mean that we need to judge other people's motives.

I mean we ask the Spirit of God show us our own motives, which may often be a mixture of good things with other stuff gone bad.

Since we are all different, it is not wrong to have disagreements or to have desires that are odds with others.

But a quarrel is a disagreement that has grown into something bigger as that word refers to a battle, a war, a fight with strife & antagonism.

And a conflict—that second term in verse 1—can refer to the heated disputes or physical combat of such battles.

So where do conversational skirmishes and big blow-ups come from?

Where do goal-oriented gossip & strategic slander start?

Verse 1 answers with another question that assumes a yes answer—yes, of course we all know that verbal vomit flows from upset desires.

The answer to the age-old question of why we can't all just get along is that we all have selfish desires & we let those rule us.

And those desires—even good ones that go bad—cause problems in relationships and we don't all always get along.

The world may say our problems stem from what other people have done to us or not done for us.

Or they may blame our genetics or brain wave patterns or chemicals or other pseudo-scientific explanations that sound official.

Such theories have ebbed & flowed from blaming one's environment to blaming biological or physical factors.

But James points to what used to seem like common sense because he wrote as if the answer is obvious.

When he asked where quarrels and conflicts come from, he answered by appealing to the obvious—it's our desires.

Rather than rushing to react or to tell someone else, we can first talk to God & **recognize that the problem in conflict is in our desires**.

James says they come from our pleasures, from wanting to be pleased by what we enjoy or delight in or find agreeable.

And those pleasures wage war in our members, which refer to all the parts of us materially and immaterially.

They come from inside our thoughts & attitudes & physically in our bodily cravings & comforts & stresses.

There is always a war going on inside of every true Christian.

The battle is between the Spirit and the flesh, between God's truth and the lies of sin, between worship and idolatry.

Knowing that should simplify our analysis of our problems.

We can ask ourselves—as you've likely heard many times—*What are you **wanting** that you are **not getting**?*

Or we can ask—*What are you **getting** that you are **not** wanting?*

We can ask ourselves those questions to recognize the problem in conflict & we can ask those questions in helping each other.

Ask—*“What are you wanting that you are not getting?” & “What are you getting that you are not wanting?”*

We may be wanting convenience or comfort or for our needs to be met or for others to treat us how they ought to.

Some such desires may not be evil, but we can handle them wrongly.

We might spew sinful words or murmur hateful grumblings or stew in self-pity or stay silent or isolate or avoid someone.

Those last options are lesser versions of the murder verse 2 describes.

As 1st John 3:15 says, “*Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer*”, applying what Jesus said in Matthew 5:21-22.

That word for lust in verse 2 most basically means a desire, a want.

It is not necessarily something evil, though it often describes a sinful desire in Scripture.

It can be a good desire that goes bad by becoming a demand.

Please note that typical progression—a want or desire is so craved & prized that it becomes viewed & treated as a need.

When it's seen as a need, then we assume others must meet that need & so it becomes a demand, a “must-have” as advertisers call it.

So the dangerous progression goes from “I **want**”, to “I **need**”, to “I **must have**”—from **desire** to **need** to **demand**.

Then a demand creates an expectation—if I must have something, then I **expect** to get it and I **expect** others to give it to me.

And listen—such desire can be anything like an orderly house or obedient children or a godly marriage or faithful friends or diligent coworkers or honest businessmen or whatever.

We can want **good** things and yet those wants can become sinful desires if they morph into needs and demands and expectations.

Think what happens when others do not meet our expectations.

We are disappointed, right?

And when we are disappointed, we often respond with some form of **punishment** though we rarely call it that.

Some respond by clamming up & others respond by blowing up.

And those are just verbal means of **punishment**.

Punishment can be the silent treatment or building emotional walls to shut people out and protect ourselves from them.

Those silent responses are like quiet forms of murder.

Think of it—if you act like someone is not there or you treat them like they do not exist or they are not allowed to reach you relationally, then it's like you are murdering them from your experience.

You are killing any relationship with them and if you totally ignore them, you are annihilating them from your life.

That's one punishment for the disappointment of unmet expectations.

Words that slice and dice people by aggression or volume or by sarcastic stabbing can also be other forms of **punishment**.

So do not think that you and I do not fit into James 4:2 simply because we have never actually killed someone.

In the fullest sense of the 6th commandment, we should speak & work to preserve life, encourage life, and build up others.

So in whatever way we tear down and wrongly crush others, we are sinning against God's good and wise command.

And that point of James 4:2 is clarified by the next phrase when it uses synonymous terms to say basically the same thing.

To be envious is to desire, have zeal & be jealous to want something.

That is desire gone bad into need and demand and expectation.

Verse 2 says the result of that sinful progression is that we fight & quarrel, using verb forms of the nouns for fight & quarrel in verse 1.

Again, the point is to recognize the problem in conflict.

We do not need to shift the blame on others for what they failed to do even if it would have been right & godly for them to do it.

Even though we are very crafty at rationalizing our sin, we must stop it and own up to it.

We need to see the desires that fuel our difficulties.

When a desire undergoes an ugly makeover into a need and then into a demand and an expectation, trouble is sure to come.

So to respond rightly, we need to see the motives behind our messes.

But seeing our motives is not going far enough.

Sometimes I think we can faithfully uncover our motives & then we whine or pout or justify ourselves because we simply want some good thing that God's Word even commands.

I simply want my kids to obey me.

You only want your husband or your wife to live his or her role & for your marriage to be what God intended it to be.

We only want people to be honest with us or to listen to us or to keep their commitments or to help in doing their part.

We only want God to answer our prayers.

And then we ask—“*What's wrong those desires?*”

Or others may ask us, “*What’s wrong with wanting good things?*”

What do you say to that?

Often that question assumes that we have a right to such good things or that God should give us such good things.

How do you respond to that?

We can agree that there is nothing wrong with wanting a godly marriage or obedient kids or honest work.

We can agree that we should desire and even ask for others to pull their weight and do their part.

But the question is how we hold those desires and who we ultimately seek to fulfill those requests.

And that is where James turned upward at the end of verse 2.

He turned from the horizontal—from looking around at people and unmet expectations—to the vertical relationship with God.

The ask at the end of verse 2 is asking God—read it. [READ]

Who is ultimately in charge of how our desires are met or unmet?

God is, right? God is sovereign over every person & situation.

So if we have issues of discontentment or anger or bitterness or quarrels or fights, then really, we may have issues with **God**.

Of course, there will be situations of conflict where we must stand for truth or where we must obey God rather than others.

Like if your kids disobey, it may create conflict for you to bring discipline and correction, but you must do it.

To fail to train your kids is to sin against God and against them.

To fail to act on responsibilities in other situations could be sin also.

It would be sin, obviously, to fail to profess Christ or to lie or deny truth just because conflict would arise.

So we admit that conflicts will come—for example, 2nd Timothy 3:12 says *all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*.

But in the regular rhythms of life, we need to be alert to what conflict can teach us.

We need to see the Godward part of our problems—to see the part of our problems that are oriented toward God.

We need to consider how God factors into the problems.

As a 3rd point today, we might say—remember the Person in charge.

Surveying the larger flow of James 3-4 can help us (1st) realize the potential of communication, (2nd) recognize the problem in conflict, & how (3rd) remember the Person in charge.

Observation #3—remember the Person in charge—and who is that?—it’s God, right—remember that God is in charge, that He is ultimate.

At the end of verse 2, James turns eyes upward by stating to his readers that *you do not have because you do not ask*.

Read through verse 12 for this Godward turn—James 4:2-12. [READ]

This asking is not asking others—it’s asking God in prayer.

It is about pleading with God for Him to show grace—for Him to answer not because we deserve it, but because He is gracious.

It’s a posture of humble faith in our good & gracious God.

It's about recognizing what James 1:17 says, that *"Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow."*

Since God is so stable & trustworthy & He is the source of all good, our first response to a desire or need should be to **pray**.

If you think of it, James plots a path for counseling ourselves & others.

1st, ask about your desires & then ask if you've prayed about it.

That's a great way to help each other when we share our struggles.

When you hear of wants and needs, ask each other if you've prayed about it and listen—don't be offended by that question.

Do not react by saying, *"Of course, I've prayed about it."*

Then go to the next step James gives, as we see **in verse 3**, that gets to the **why** behind the prayer—read it again. [READ]

Next ask: **Why** do you want this & what has **motivated** your prayers?

That is vital because our prayers should seek what glorifies God & syncs with Jesus' character as we pray in His name.

But verse 3 highlights how sometimes we do not get what we want even though it may be good & even though we may pray about it.

We may be asking wrongly, asking for selfish motives.

Those wrong motives could be to spend or consume or use what we want for our pleasures, for our fleshly desires.

Spending uses a word that can mean waste or squander like the prodigal son did in Luke 15:13—it's not invested, it's gone.

What are some ways we may pray with such wrong selfish motives?

Do you ever want people to do the right thing for your own convenience, because it will make your own life easier?

I'm sad to say that I do sometimes—sometimes I realize that basically I'm wanting others to do what's right for my own selfish comfort.

It will make my life easier if everyone does the right thing.

We don't say it, but we may think if every person always did what was perfect, then it would serve us so well & we'd be so content.

But wait—that's the kind of wrong motive verse 3 addresses.

Often our troubles start when we treat God as a cosmic genie who is supposed to fulfill all my longings for my own purposes.

And even when we pray with right motives, we still must keep a humble attitude that recognizes that **God does not owe us**.

Asking with right motives includes asking with humble submission to whatever will most glorify God.

We should pray believing & expressing to God our faith in His Word & why requests glorify Him according to His Word.

But then we pray with open hearts realizing that God can give or take away and we can be satisfied first and foremost with God alone.

As many have said before me, we might picture it like praying with open hands rather than closed fists.

We ask God with open hands for Him to give or take away & not with closed fists that say I must have this or I cannot have this taken away.

When we move from asking to insisting, then our hands move from open to God to closed in fists that fight against God.

That move is also a move from humility to pride and as verse 6 says, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

So remembering the Person in charge as James 4 describes is recalling our need to humbly submit to God & His providence.

When we seek God humbly, we can thank Him in whatever He gives.

And I don't have time to get into the details of verses 4-12, but the battle lines are clearly drawn on God's side & against God.

You can see there that being a friend of the world—seeking worldly desires—makes you an enemy aligned against God.

That is the side of pride, the side of the devil to be resisted, the side of doublemindedness to be mourned over & repented of.

Yet repentance & humbly drawing near to God brings grace, God's undeserved kindness to cleanse & forgive & work by His Spirit.

And that submission to God changes the way we speak, as verse 11 again comes back to how all this relates to our speech.

With that kind of submitted heart under God, we can approach our troubles and conflicts with a totally different perspective.

Sometimes we still need to stand for truth & will face conflict.

But many times, we must realize that our hearts have strayed from central devotion to God & our conflict is revealing that.

When we see our selfishness, we can remember the Person in charge is gracious & forgiving & cleansing & good & faithful.

He is the God who promises to give good gifts to His children & to work all things together for good for those in Christ.

We can seek Him & trust Him & let Him give as He chooses.

Then we can let Him transform how we think about our desires & needs & demands & expectations & relationships.

We can do so if we know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Jesus is the only One ever to live on this earth and handle every situation perfectly and never to sin.

He is the God-man whose perfect life is offered to us if we turn from ourselves & sin to trust Him as our righteousness instead.

And Jesus is also the only One who could die to pay the sin's penalty for other people and that's what He did on the cross.

He died to atone for every sinful thought, word, and deed of every person who will ever trust Him as Lord and Savior.

If you don't know Him, I urge you to trust Him to receive new life.

When we trust Christ, He not only forgives our past & secures our eternal future, but He also transforms us in the present.

You can have that hope by following Him in faith & so let us know if we can help you follow Him.

He gives the power to change as we receive His love & mercy that reshapes all our relationships.

I pray that these reminders from James 3-4 prove helpful for you all as they continue to be for me.

1st, realize the potential in communication; 2nd, recognize the problem in conflict; and 3rd, remember the Person in charge.

Let's pray for God to use His Word in us as we close.