

Why We Fight
James 3:13-4:10

Wars and fightings, quarrels and conflicts. Is there anything else in the news these days? And it's not just ISIS thugs rampaging through Syria or fanatics setting off bombs in New York City or wielding knives in Minnesota. Congress can't seem to get anything done anymore – months of gridlock are punctuated by days of frantic scrambling to avoid yet another government shutdown. And as politicians increasingly portray their opponents as incorrigibly wicked, any hint of compromise is immediately condemned as betrayal.

So what's behind all the conflict? James talks about bitter envying and strife, jealousy and selfish ambition, and that sounds familiar, doesn't it? It's so easy to envy others, to be jealous of some other group that seems to be getting a better deal, to think that shadowy forces of selfish ambition are the cause of all our misery. The unions blame the management, Black Lives Matter protesters blame the police, Donald Trump's supporters blame the immigrants, Hillary Clinton blames a "vast, right-wing conspiracy," Conservatives blame the government and Liberals blame the opponents of the government.

And it would be very easy to try to sort out all these competing claims, to try to figure out who's closer to the truth. But even if we could master all the economic data, and even if we could understand all the demographic shifts taking place around us, none of that really explains the bitterness, the venom that has engulfed our society. I mean, we've always had disagreements, but why does everyone seem to be so angry all of a sudden? Or as James puts it in verse 16, why is there such confusion, such disorder? What's the real source of all these evil works?

Again, leave it to James to shoot straight. In verses 1 and 2, he says that wars and fightings come from lust. While some only nurture hate in their hearts, resenting those who are standing in their way, this lust drives some to the point of murder. But these wars, these fights, these quarrels all stem from one basic problem – people lusting after what they cannot obtain.

And at this point, it would be very easy for us Southern Presbyterians to feel pretty good about ourselves. After all, we are not generally known to be particularly passionate people. In fact, we are often mocked as being the "frozen chosen." We couldn't imagine going out in the streets and protesting anything – that would be tacky. And while we might agree with some of the points that our more rambunctious politicians make, we definitely wouldn't say the things they do in public, and certainly not so loudly!

But in verse 1, James isn't condemning so much the intensity of our desires as he is their direction. For the Greek word translated here as "lust," forms the root of our word "hedonism." In other words, James points an accusing finger not at the intemperance of our passions, but at the focus of our pleasures.

So, let's think about the things that give us pleasure. It doesn't have to be anything bad in and of itself. But is there anything you desire, anything you enjoy that if you lost it, you would become irritated?

Last Saturday I went to Hattiesburg for a Cursillo staff training event, so I took my bike to the shop and had it serviced and cleaned. New brake pads and it stops on a dime. Shiny chain and gears shift

smoothly. Paint gleams and aluminum shines. But this has been a busy week – a trip to Orlando on Monday and Tuesday, and a trip to Jackson on Friday have really chopped things up, not to mention meetings every evening and a rainy Saturday. The bike beckons, but there has been precious little time to ride. And as I wrote this sermon I found myself more than a little miffed, frustrated.

Is there any little luxury, any daily habit that you think you deserve, and it would really bother you if you couldn't enjoy it? Is there anything you like so much that you might become resentful if someone took it away from you? Is there any activity you are pursuing, any plan you are working on that is so important to you that you would become angry if someone stood in the way of its completion? So is it really hard for us to imagine that people would quarrel or even fight over things they think they really need?

So, what's the answer to the tension that is all around us, and even within us? How can we gain that wisdom from above, so that we might become the sort of people James describes in verse 17, the sort of people I hope we all want to be – pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, merciful people who don't demonstrate either partiality or hypocrisy?

Well, what does James say is the source of such wisdom? In verse 15, he says it comes from above. It has a heavenly perspective. It looks on us the way God sees us, not in the way we so often see ourselves.

For when we look in the mirror, what do we see? What is our view of self? Do we think that we are better than others, better than those who are violent and crude, better than those who are ignorant and lazy? Do we think we deserve to have things the way we want them? We've already seen that such a proud, arrogant view of the self lies at the heart of most of our conflicts. And in verse 15, James goes so far as to say that such pride is demonic.

So, what's the alternative? How can we see ourselves from a heavenly perspective? James tells us in verse 6, where he quotes from Psalm 138: God resists, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. That's why James tells us in verse 7 to submit ourselves, to surrender ourselves to God.

Now, since James has already told us that the root of our conflicts is the things we desire, and if the answer to our selfish desires is humility, we would have expected him to say that we should humble ourselves before one another. We would think that the key to making the sort of peace that verse 18 mentions is the sort of mutual submission that Paul describes in our responsive reading, thinking of others as better than ourselves. We would think that he would appeal to the teaching of Jesus, Who said that service to others is the key to true greatness.

And all of that is true, but, as usual, James goes straight to the heart of the matter. For how can we humble ourselves before others if we don't first humble ourselves before God? After all, human pride may reveal itself most clearly when we look down on other people, but the only reason we do that, the only reason we sit in judgment on others is because we have first put ourselves in God's place.

That's why when Paul was urging the Christians in Philippi to stop their squabbling and demonstrate humility toward one another, he pointed to the example of Jesus, Who submitted Himself, Who humbled Himself before the Father, obeying the will of God to the point of going to the cross. We can only humble ourselves before one another, we can only sow the fruit of righteousness in peace, we can

only make peace with one another if we first humble ourselves before God and allow Him to fill us with the Spirit of Christ.

But this wisdom from above not only tells us that we should correct our view of ourselves. Because it comes from heaven, it says that we must change our attitude toward the things of this world. In other words, we must not only examine the self-focus of our desires. We must also re-evaluate the object of our desires. For it is entirely possible that we fight with one another because we are desiring the wrong things.

So, what is it that we desire the most? What do we spend most of our time wanting and working for? Verse 15 condemns wisdom that is earthly and sensual, wisdom focused on things we can see and touch. Are those the sorts of things we desire? Do we imagine that the things of this world are most worthy of our time and attention? If so, James brings us up short in verse 4, when he says that friendship with the world is enmity with God.

Now, I know that sounds pretty unrealistic, right? I mean, why can't we give some of our affection to God while we also love lots of the things He made? Why can't we spend some of our time pleasing ourselves, focusing on the worldly things that we want and need? That's what our worldly wisdom says, wisdom that verse 15 tells us is earthly, and sensual, and – demonic. Is James just being an extremist?

Well, let's think again about the example of Christ that Paul held up to us in our responsive reading. Did Jesus withhold any of His love from us? Did He hold anything back from us that we needed? Did He hold back any of His love, any of His obedience from His Father? Did He keep anything for Himself? Or did He give Himself away completely? So, if we say we want to follow Christ, why should we think we should do anything less?

And remember what Jesus told us about the essence of the Law? Did He tell us to love the Lord our God with some of our heart, mind, soul and strength, while we keep some of that love for ourselves and our pleasures? No, He said that we are to love God with all we are and all we have. So how can we desire worldly things and still love God in the exclusive way He deserves?

James, in his very blunt and direct way, makes the same point at the very beginning of verse 4. Look at what he calls those whose hearts are divided between God and the things of the world – he calls us adulterers and adulteresses. In short, he's saying that dividing our hearts between God and the things of this world is just like cheating on our spouse. God deserves the same sort of exclusive affection that husbands and wives promise to give to one another. In short, how can we say we love God the way He deserves, if at the same time we are so wrapped up in the things of this world that we are willing to fight and argue over them?

So, where does all this leave us? How can we possibly live up to Christ's standards for us? How can we live at peace with one another by loving God in such a whole-hearted way?

Well, why did you come to love your spouse? I have admittedly very little experience with this subject, but I'm told that one of the most attractive things in another person, one of the biggest reasons you come to love someone is knowing that he or she loves you. Knowing you are loved draws you close to the one who loves you.

And verse 5 should remind us of God's great love for us. For it really means that God is jealous for the Spirit He has caused to dwell in us. The amazing truth is that while we are jealous and desire so many other worldly things, God is jealous for us. God's greatest desire is for us – for all those who trust in Christ, all those to whom He has given the gift of the Holy Spirit. That's why He gave His Son to die for us. That's why Jesus was willing to humble Himself to the point of death on the cross – that's how much He loves us.

No, we don't love God that much – none of us do. But that's why verse 6 is so reassuring: no matter how far short we fall from God's standards, no matter how cold our hearts may be toward God, He promises us grace. Because Christ went to the cross on our behalf, we can be sure that God will give us the love and forgiveness that we need, not the judgment that our fickle double-mindedness deserves.

So what can we do about our double-mindedness? How can we hope to love God in the selfless, self-sacrificial, unconditional way that He loves us? Look at the promises we find in verses 8 through 10. If we mourn our sins, turning away from them and turning to Christ in faith, the cross reminds us that forgiveness is ours. If we submit ourselves completely to God, if we humble ourselves in His presence, confessing the selfishness and pride we demonstrate towards one another, confessing the coldness of our hearts toward Him, He promises that He will lift us up.

Brothers and sisters, Christ had to die so that we might be saved. So does it really make sense for us to go on thinking so highly of ourselves? Christ loved us so much that He was willing to die for us. So does it really make sense for us to love the things of the world more than Him, more than His people?

Let us pray. Lord, you promised that if we draw near to You, that You will draw near to us. So that's what we're doing now. Puncture our pride with the nails that crucified the Savior of the world. Burn away our selfish desires with the fire of Your unconditional love. Fill us with Your Holy Spirit so that your jealous love would bind us ever closer to You. Let us demonstrate the humble, loving character of Christ to all those around us. And let us love You the way that You deserve – with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength.