

*Passions at War: James 4:1-3*  
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Sunday, September 21, 2008

The passage we're going to study this morning is about quarrels and fighting. And I begin by asking you: Have you been part of any quarrels? Have you gotten into any fights lately? Are there any conflicts going on in your life? Are there any strained relationships? Have there been arguments in your household lately (maybe even this morning)? The question that is raised in James 4 is: what causes these quarrels? What causes these fights? How would you answer that question? Think about a particular quarrel that you've been a part of, or are involved in right now: what would you say is the cause of that quarrel? Immediately our minds begin to churn out reason after reason, all having to do with the person on the other side of the conflict. All external reasons. We always point the finger away from ourselves, never toward ourselves. But God's Word, serving as a mirror for our souls, will not allow us to deceive ourselves like this. When we look into the clear (and often painful) truth of the Bible, there's a finger pointing directly at my heart, and at your heart, saying, "You're the problem!"

We are wired (because of our sin) to always play the blame game. It started with Adam and Eve in the Garden. Adam said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (Gen 3:12). And then Eve said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." And the same tendency continues today. Whenever we sin, we want to blame it on someone or something else. Earlier in the letter of James, we're told, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God, for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death'" (James 1:13-15). There's no room for us to blame our sin on God or anybody else. It comes from our own desire. And in James 4 we're told the same thing regarding quarrels and fighting.

I beg of you this morning to listen to this passage with an open heart, with a humble heart. Sin is so subtle and seductive that even as we consider a passage like this we think to ourselves, "So and so really needs to hear this." NO! You need to hear this! I need to hear this! Please, consider your *own* heart right now, and open yourself to the rebuke of God's Word. What a disgrace it is to the Name of Christ when Christians bicker and quarrel and fight. This is so when we quarrel with any person, and it is even more so when we quarrel with one another. Listen to what Spinoza wrote

about Christians. He was a 17<sup>th</sup> century Jewish philosopher. He said, “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” (quoted in Moo, *The Letter of James*, 181). Are there unbelievers around us who would say the same thing? “Those Christians—all they do is fight. Why would I want to have anything to do with them?” Jesus said in John 13:35, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” How will anyone know that we love Jesus when we fight among ourselves and slander one another and hold grudges against brothers and sisters in Christ? So let’s all look seriously at our own lives and let the Word pierce us and change us.

I see three points in these verses. First of all, sinful passions produce quarrels. Secondly, sinful passions produce the illusion of self-sufficiency. And thirdly, sinful passions produce ineffective prayers. We’ll look at each of those points in a moment. But first I want to point out the flow of thought in the context here. Last week we looked at chapter 3:13-18, which contrasts the wisdom from above with earthly, unspiritual, demonic wisdom. And even though there’s a chapter division, I think 4:1-3 are pretty closely tied to those verses in chapter 3 (the chapter and verse divisions were not found in the original letter, but were added much later so that we could refer to specific chapters and verses). In verses 17-18 of chapter 3 James uses the word peace or peaceable 3 times. He describes the wisdom from above as “peaceable.” Then he writes, “And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” He is stating the good fruit of godly wisdom. And now, in 4:1-3 he is describing the evil fruit of earthly, unspiritual, demonic wisdom. This is the exact opposite of peace. So it seems that 4:1-3 is a more detailed explanation of the fruit of earthly wisdom.

### **Sinful Passions Produce Quarrels (verses 1-2a)**

Verse 1 and the first half of verse 2 show us that sinful passions produce quarrels. The word “passions” is used in verse 1 and verse 3, and the Greek word is *hēdonē*. From that word, you might guess, we get the word “hedonism.” Pleasure-seeking. And Pastor John Piper loves to write and speak about Christian Hedonism, which is a provocative way of emphasizing the biblical truth that we are to seek our pleasure in God. But what is referred to here is a very anti-Christian hedonism. This hedonism, these pleasures, are a shriveled up confined pursuit of pleasure in

wanting to make myself comfortable, and make myself look good, and get my way. This word is only used 5 times in the New Testament, and two of them are here, in verse 1 and verse 3. It's also found in the parable of the sower, in Luke 8:14, where it says that those who fell among the thorns "are choked by the cares and riches and *pleasures* of life, and their fruit does not mature." Paul uses the word in Titus 3:3, and Peter uses it in 2 Peter 2:13, in both cases it refers to sinful pleasures. And it's these sinful pleasures or passions that produce quarrels.

Verse 1 starts with this question, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" James doesn't tell us what the particular quarrels and fights are that he's thinking of, which shows that he is much more concerned with the condition of his readers' hearts. He's not concerned to figure out who is right and who is wrong. He wants each person to examine his or her own heart, and so he simply and generally asks about quarrels and fights among you. Maybe the conflicts concerned the leadership of the church, or what the church should do or not do, or how the church's resources should be used. Maybe there were conflicts that arose from partiality, as was discussed in chapter 2. Whatever the specifics were in the first century church, the quarrels and fights were probably similar to the kind of conflicts that our church, or any other church, might deal with today.

James then answers his question with another question. And here is where the mirror of God's Word discloses our own guilt. Notice that when James asks the question "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" he doesn't then say, "It's Mr. So and So, and Mrs. So and So who are causing the quarrels and fights. Get them out of our congregation and you'll be fine." No, he doesn't point to any specific individuals or specific situations, but rather points to each and every one of us. "Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you." The source of these conflicts is within us! It's not external. It's internal. We can't point our fingers at somebody else, but only at our own sin. Our own pleasures, our own sinful, prideful, self-centered desires.

And maybe somebody else did start it. Maybe it was someone else who initiated the conflict. But that's not even the issue here. The question is, how am I responding to it, how am I trying to resolve it rather than worsen the situation. How am I sowing peace rather than further quarrels? How am I trying to move things toward harmony rather than disharmony?

These passions, it says in verse 1, are at war within you. Literally, it says, "at war within your members." This is a war that is going on inside of us. Within each of us is an ongoing and fierce battle between the flesh and the Spirit, between the old self and the

new self, between our sinful passions and our holy passions. 1 Peter 2:11 uses the same word for “wage war.” It says, “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.” If you’re a Christian, then this battle is something that characterizes your life. There are passions within you that are part of your sinful nature. And then there are passions within you that God has placed there—a passion to know Him, to pray to Him, to read His Word, to be with other believers, to witness to unbelievers, to live in harmony and to make peace. The sinful passions and the godly passions will be at odds with another, and at war with one another until the day we die or the Lord returns.

The first part of verse 2 explains how these internal sinful passions produce quarrels. Basically, they are selfish desires that are frustrated. They are cravings that are unfulfilled. People want to satisfy their own private desires, and there are others who stand in the way of that. So they commit murder and fight and quarrel. It’s doubtful that anybody was actually killing others over a church conflict, but James seems to be pointing to the murderous intent that is tied up with these passions. When you’re so wrapped up in yourself and so controlled by selfish desires, there can be an intense hatred toward those who have what you want. Doug Moo writes, “Verbal argument, private violence, or national conflict—the cause of them all can be traced back to the wrongful lust to want more than we have, to be envious of and covet what others have, whether it be their position or their possessions” (*The Letter of James*, 184). Frustrated selfish desires will produce all kinds of conflict and hatred and division, or as James puts it in 3:16, “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.”

### **Sinful Passions Produce the Illusion of Self-Sufficiency**

In the last sentence of verse 2 we see a second point about these passions, namely, that they produce the illusion of self-sufficiency. In our rebellion against God, we think that we can make it on our own. Therefore, we do not ask, and do not receive what we truly need. Verse 2 says, at the end of the verse, “You do not have because you do not ask.” There are all of these unfulfilled desires and cravings, and James says you murder and you fight and quarrel. But what should be done? You should ask. These sinful passions produce fighting and quarreling. And they also produce an illusion of self-sufficiency, because we think we can get what we want on our own. We think we can fulfill these passions by stepping on other people and arguing with other people to get our own way. That is the arrogant way. That is the prideful way. Instead, we need to be humbled. We need to be brought to

our knees to see that we are not self-sufficient. We cannot make it on our own. We are needy. We are desperate. And instead of going on in arrogance thinking that we can provide for ourselves the things we want, we need to come to the end of ourselves and ASK. We don't have because we don't ask.

What other verses in the letter of James do you think of when you read this word "ask"? The word is used 4 times by James: in 4: 2, 3, the verses that we're looking at right now. And in 1: 5, 6, where it says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind."

In light of those verses I think it's likely that in chapter 4 James has in mind asking *God for wisdom*. He says, "You do not have because you do not ask." And we might wonder, Ask whom? Answer: God. This is about making requests to God. And then we might also wonder, Ask for what? And I think James probably has in mind specifically *asking for wisdom*. Instead of relying on earthly wisdom and thinking that you can make it on your own, you need to humble yourself before the Lord and beg for the wisdom that comes down from above.

### **Sinful Passions Produce Ineffective Prayers (verse 3)**

Thirdly (and finally) we see in verse 3 that sinful passions also produce ineffective prayers. "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." Some, in their arrogance, won't ask. Others, also in their arrogance, will ask, but they ask wrongly, to spend it on their passions. Here's that word, *hēdonē*, for the second time in our passage. These hedonistic, self-serving passions / desires / pleasures. In verse 1 these passions are the cause of quarrels and fights. And in verse 3 they are the reason why prayers are ineffective.

How does this verse relate to James 1:5, which I just read, where it says, "let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, *and it will be given him*"? Or what about Matthew 7:7, where Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given to you . . ." What's the difference between those verses and James 4:3? Why does it say in certain places, "Ask, and it will be given to you," and here James says, "you ask and do not receive"?

James explains very clearly in the second half of the verse. It's "because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." The question is: what are your motives when you go to God in prayer? Are you asking Him for wisdom in the hope that other's will think highly of you? Are you asking for money so that your life can be more comfortable? Are you asking for success so that you can be

recognized in the eyes of the world? Or are you bringing your petitions to God with a Kingdom perspective and with a humble heart? We should ask for wisdom, and ask for God's provision, and ask for God to bless our work, not to glorify ourselves, but to glorify God. We should pray, not according to our will, but according to His will. 1 John 5:14 says, "And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us." The key phrase there is, "according to his will." And the more we study the Holy Scriptures, and the more we meditate on the truth revealed here, the more we will know His will and the more our prayers will be in line with His will. We'll be convicted of how shallow and how self-serving many of our prayers are.

A couple weeks ago I saw a man wearing a T-shirt that read, "I'm your Dad, not an ATM." And as I've been studying this passage in James I've thought about how that T-shirt so often characterizes the way we approach God. We come to Him like He's an ATM machine. We come to Him for His money, for His gifts, for His ability to get us out of tough situations, instead of coming to Him because of who He is.

We come to God asking: could I please have some more money, could I please have a nicer house, could I please have an easier life. And the only reason we're asking is because we want the gifts, and not the Giver. This kind of asking belittles God. It diminishes His infinite value and beauty, because we're coming to Him for the stuff He can give us, not because of who He is. When we ask, whatever it is we ask for, we should be asking with a desire for God Himself.

He is what we need. And He is what we truly desire. We have all these cravings and yearnings, but the only thing in the entire universe that will satisfy those cravings is God, Himself. Don't be an idolater. Don't run to things other than God for your ultimate satisfaction. And don't run to God asking for things that simply gratify the flesh. Go to God and ask for God. Humble yourself, acknowledge your need, acknowledge your sin, and ask God for the wisdom from above. And approach Him as your Heavenly Father, not your heavenly ATM machine.

This ought to challenge each of us to ask: Why do I pray? What do I pray for? What is it that I'm seeking in my prayers? Is it God whom I desire? Or do I just desire His gifts? And among the gifts we must include not only material possessions, health, friendships, family members, but also the gifts of forgiveness, escape from hell, eternity in heaven. Do you desire God, or just His gifts?

Jonathan Edwards, living in the 1700s, wrote a book entitled *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*. His project in

that book was to determine the distinguishing marks of true Christianity. In one section he writes about the nature of genuine love for God, and he makes this distinction between loving God because of what He can do for me, and loving God because of who He is. On the one hand, Edwards writes, there are some who “allow God to be lovely in himself no otherwise, than that he has forgiven and accepted them, loves them above most in the world, and has engaged to improve all his infinite power and wisdom in preferring, dignifying, and exalting them, and will do for them just as they would have him” (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, pg. 276). Do you understand what Edwards is saying? There are some who love God only because of what God can do for them. Their love for God is based on the fact that God forgives them, accepts them, loves them, exalts them, and will do for them whatever they desire. Does that characterize your love for God? Does that characterize your prayers to God?

On the other hand, the true believer loves God because of God’s innate beauty and glory and majesty. It’s not, first of all, because of what He does for me, but because of who He is. Edwards writes, “The first foundation of the delight a true saint has in God, is his own perfection; and the first foundation of the delight he has in Christ, in his own beauty; he appears in himself the chief among ten thousand, and altogether lovely. The way of salvation by Christ is a delightful way to him, for the sweet and admirable manifestations of the divine perfections in it. The holy doctrines of the gospel, by which God is exalted and man abased, holiness honoured and promoted, sin greatly disgraced and discouraged, and free, sovereign love manifested, are *glorious* doctrines in his eyes, and sweet to his taste, *prior* to any conception of his *interest* in these things” (pg. 277). God is glorious! The Gospel is beautiful! And if you only see God and the Gospel as things that can benefit your personal interests, then you’re missing the point, and you’re probably not a Christian! Look to God, Himself. Look to His glorious plan of salvation, that He sent His Son to die on a cross for sinners, and that He rose on the third day, and is coming again. Look away from yourself, from your petty desires, from your sinful pleasures, and delight in God. This will change the way we pray, and it will produce effective prayers—God-glorifying, Kingdom-building prayers.

We’ve seen in this passage this morning that sinful passions produce quarrels and fights, they produce the illusion of self-sufficiency, and they produce ineffective prayers. In response to this text we each need to look at how these things are evident in our lives. Are there quarrels and fights? Are we attempting to be self-sufficient? Are we praying only with our selfish interests in mind? Then we need to admit, as this text shows us, that these

things are a result of our own sinful passions. And then there's only one place to go, and that is to the cross of Jesus Christ. Because it was on the cross that Jesus Christ paid the penalty that we deserve. It was on the cross that He bore our sin. It was on the cross that He purchased our redemption. For all who repent of sin and trust in Jesus, we are forgiven. And we are changed, so that our sinful passions are replaced with holy passions. Quarrels and fights give way to peace and harmony. Self-reliance turns into a humble dependence on God for all things. And our petty self-seeking prayers become impassioned petitions for God's Name to be exalted in all the earth. Let's pray together that these changes would be evident in all of our lives.