

James 4:1-3 What Causes Quarreling and Fighting

Have you ever had a fight? I'll let you in on something you probably didn't know. I used to fight a bit, was even suspended in high school for a fight in the middle of a class room. I remember another fight back in the 6th grade where me and another guy were both taken to the hallway and paddled three times with the famous "Big Bertha." Maybe you haven't gotten into a fist fight. But, have you ever had a quarrel where you've used your words against another person in a fit of rage? Have you ever witnessed a fight or a quarrel? Of course you have! There is an endless political fight going on. And in our world, countries fight and quarrel, even going to war. And we see the same thing within churches with all kinds of quarreling and fighting. Why? James gives us the answer in our text today. And though the source of fighting and quarreling is the same for the world as it is for the Church, James is concerned with the people of God. With this in mind, I have 4 causes of quarrels and fighting, with some applications.

1. Entrenched Desires. Look at v. 1: **"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?"** The word for quarrel can mean strife or any kind of battle. And then he adds the word "fights" which is where I get the word "entrenched." It is a military word that pictures a battle or war. Wars and battles between armies throughout history, and especially through WWI included opposing armies that would dig trenches which were great for defense. It was extremely difficult to move an entrenched army from their ground. If you saw the movie, 1917, you will know what I mean. Both the Germans and the Allied armies built long trenches that sometimes extended for miles, facing one another. And the middle ground was full of obstacles like barbed wire and more trenches. And it was almost impossible to move the other side. That is why we might say, *"I'm dug in,"* or *"I'm in the trenches,"* meaning, *"I'm in this for the long haul; I will not be easily moved."*

Well, this is the way James describes our "passions" or "desires" within us. They are entrenched. They are at war within us. The word used in v. 1 is where we get our word "hedonism," which is associated with self-seeking pleasure. And according to James, these desires have a negative meaning; they can lead to sin and death. Look back at 1:14-15: **"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."** Peter says the same kind of thing in his letter. In 1 Pet. 2:11: **"Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul."** Paul says the same thing to Timothy: **"If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain"** (1 Tim. 6:3-5).

I believe the Bible is clear. Because of sin, we all have "entrenched" desires. And these desires are dug in. Therefore, our goal is to do what Paul says, ***"Put these things to death"*** (Col. 3:5). And this can only be done by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let me finish this truth by reading Titus 3:3-7 for some application. **"For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by**

others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

2. Unmet Desires. Another cause of quarreling and fight are when our desires are not met. This really follows the first truth. We want what we want and when we don't get it, we quarrel and fight. Look at v. 2: **“You desire and do not have, so you murder . . .”** Let me say first I am not convinced that any of James' recipients were murdering their brothers and sisters. If this were the case, James would have dealt with such problem in detail. We must remember that James is following the teaching of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. And Jesus says, **“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire”** (Matt. 5:21-22). We must always remember that sin begins in the heart. **“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”** So, in this case, we see that unmet desires cause us to sin, beginning in the heart as we do not love our brother or sister.

Think of a small child, say a one-year-old. What if you feed your child bananas and grits, which is what we used to feed Caleb. But then, you try and give him/her canned spinach. You may find out that there is a strong unmet desire for bananas and grits. Things can go from pleasant and peaceful to a mess instantly as the child spits the food out, makes faces, raises his arms and starts to scream. This is an unmet desire which leads to a tantrum. Any infant that does not get what he wants, would surely give you a left hook if they could. *“I want what I want NOW. And if you don't give it to me, I'm going to quarrel and fight until I get me way.”* We do the same thing as adults as we throw tantrums in the heart when our desires are unmet.

And let me say, a great number of our desires are not bad in and of themselves. A desire for money is not bad. There is nothing wrong with working hard and making money, and lots of it, if possible. But, when we start to love money and desire it in a sinful way and not get it like we think we should, we may get angry, and even begin to sin in our dealings in order to get more. Maybe it is a promotion at work that we think we deserve and should get, and when we don't we quarrel and fight. Think about the Corona Virus and all the shutdowns. I want the Y to be open so I can work out, and when it doesn't, in my heart I quarrel and fight against civil authority. For some, I want my SEC football. How dare they take that away from me. I don't want to shop at Kohl's and not be able to try on my clothes. I want my spouse to treat me in a certain way. I deserve that. The possibilities of unmet desires are endless. Brothers and sisters, it is not always black and white. We often disagree. But, in the end, we must ask ourselves how we respond to unmet desires. I heard one story (from the secular world) about a CEO taking a possible hire for a high position out to breakfast. And he makes sure that when this person orders eggs over easy, they come scrambled, simply to see how this person responds in a time of unmet desires. James is concerned with wisdom. And wisdom plays itself out in peace, not in quarreling and fighting over unmet desires.

3. Coveting and Envy. Look at the 2nd part of v. 2: **“You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.”** Here, James connects fighting and quarreling to covetousness. Do you remember the tenth commandment? Exod. 20:17 says, **“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”** At the end of the day, to covet is to want something more than God himself. To covet is also to not be content with what God has given you. It is interesting that the previous commandments dealing with how we treat our neighbor are very clear to identify. Disobedience to parents, lying, stealing, adultery, and murder. But, when it comes to coveting, we can’t see it. Why? Because it starts in the heart. It is in the context of desire. But it leads to all kinds of sin. Eventually, you can see the effects of coveting. When you want something badly that does not come to you, you may secretly hate your brother or sister in your heart. You may steal from him/her. Or, you may even murder. Consider the example of Cain.

In Gen. 4:1-7 we read: **“Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.’ And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.’”** Cain wanted God to bless HIS offering. And he desired what his brother had. And when he didn’t get it, we know the story. He murdered his brother.

Now, the reason I added envy to the truth of coveting is because of James’ context. Look back at 3:16: **“For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.”** The word for jealousy in the Greek is zeal. It is where we get the word “zealot.” But, it can also be translated as envy. An unmet desire can turn to envy quickly as another person gets what we ourselves want. With Cain, he was envious that God accepted Abel’s offer, but rejected his. In James’ context, the poor may have been envious of the rich. For sure, those who thought they should be teachers and were not, were certainly envious. This makes me think of the verse: “Godliness with contentment is great gain.”

Listen to a quote from Douglas Moo: “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.”

4. Selfish Motives. Look at the end of v. 2 and then v. 3: **“You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend on your passions.”** Here we see the motive of their asking: selfish motives. They “ask wrongly.” And how do we know they are asking wrongly? Because they want God to bless them in order use the blessings of God on their passions. They were praying to God in order to indulge personal “pleasures.” A good example is the prodigal son? He asked his father for his inheritance early and when his father

gave it to him, he went and “squandered” it in reckless living. In the same kind of way, we “squander” the blessings of God on our desires.

Now, we don’t know the exact desires of James’ readers. It may have been a small group within the body that desired to be teachers (3:1) and wanted some kind of wisdom to help them achieve their goals. But in the end, it doesn’t really matter. What they desired was not what God desired for them. What they were praying for was not true wisdom. They were praying for success over their “enemies,” instead of wisdom from above. They were seeking the things of this world. This is why James says in v. 4: **“you adulterous people.”** To pray wrongly is to be an adulterer; to see other things in your heart above God himself. This is what it means to “pray according to the will of God.”

Think of all the times we only pray for God’s “physical blessings” and not for the things that are really important. *“God, bless my business.” “God bless my comings and goings.” “God, heal my brother or sister.” “God give me that good job you know I want.” “God give me strength to work harder so I can make more money to support my family.”* Now, some of these things are NOT wrong to pray for. But, if our prayers are primarily concerned with these things and not what James describes in 3:17 **“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere,”** then maybe we are guilty with exactly what James is saying here with our prayers. I will be blunt here. (In my experience of praying with Christians, this is normally what I hear.) So what does it look like to pray for wisdom?

If you go through the NT and look at the prayers of Paul, you will find very little petitions for the kinds of things we pray for. Go and check for yourselves. Consider what he prays for! He prays that God’s people would have **“wisdom and revelation in Christ”** (Eph. 1). He prays that they may know the **“hope of their calling, to know their glorious inheritance, and know the great power that works in them”** (Eph. 1). He prays that they know the **“love of Christ”** (Eph. 3). He prays that we may know the **“knowledge of God’s will through wisdom and understanding,”** that **“we will please the Lord in all things, bear fruit and grow in the knowledge of God.”** (Col. 1). In Phil. 1 he prays, **“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.”** So, I must ask, “how do you pray for yourself and for your brothers and sisters?” How you pray and what you ask for is a good indication of how wise you are, how mature you are in your faith. Let me end this morning with some applications of this particular truth and then some general applications.

Application: Here we see two warnings concerning our prayers. : Look at v. 2. First we see the sin of not asking for any of these things. We have not because we ask not. Second in v. 3 we “ask wrongly, in order to blessings of God to our own purposes.

Application: How we pray can indicate if we are truly spiritual, truly have the Holy Spirit. According to James, praying in the ways we’ve just described is to be “double-minded” and unspiritual.

Application: Think about what you really get when you ask for wisdom. In this short life of trials, you get patience. You become more steadfast. You get joy! 1:2: **“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness . . .”** And, then in v. 5: **“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”** With wisdom you get humility (1:9). With wisdom you get great faith and hope as you wait for the crown of life (1:12). And from our text last week, with wisdom you get “purity, peace, gentleness, openness to reason, mercy and good fruits, impartiality, and sincerity.” You get a “harvest of righteousness.” (3:17-18). I can only think of the prosperity gospel which says, “God, look what I’ve given, Look what I’ve done. Bless me with the wisdom and the goods of this world.” Brothers and sisters, WISDOM is godliness! Wisdom is the fruits of the Spirit. Wisdom is a right fear of God. Wisdom loves both God and man. Wisdom isn’t so much about being right or being wrong on a certain issue. Wisdom is about the things you cannot buy with money. And often you can’t see them with your eyes.

Application: God must be our greatest desire or “passion.” This is really the application of how we change our entrenched passions. God must be our passion. His ways must become our ways. We must find contentment in Him, not the things of this world, not in the people of this world. Really, this is idolatry; and idolatry leads to quarrels and fights and a lack of inner peace and disorder. In order for this to happen, we must change our desires. How do we do this? Well, let me say, it is impossible pray like this without the Holy Spirit. To put it another way, it is impossible to pray like this if you aren’t a Christian. We behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Therefore, look unto him. And then, through the process of sanctification, we learn how to pray.

Application: Sometimes we will disagree, and we can “fight.” But James is concerned with “how” we fight. As we’ve seen, the wisdom that James is speaking about here has more to do with godliness, wisdom that is **“pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere”** (3:17). At the end of the day we love one another and in this the world will know we are Christians.