

## The Adulterous Heart of Conflict

*James 4:1 Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?*

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One of the most interesting, and difficult, jobs in the world is that of Aircraft Accident Investigator. This is the person who is called in after a plane crash, to determine the cause of the crash. Particularly when there have been no survivors, an airplane accident investigator has to piece together what happened from remaining debris. Very often, the investigator is looking for a fire that began somewhere in the plane, and spread, causing explosions, or suffocating those on board, or destroying the airplane's mechanics. Back in 1987, SAA lost the the Helderberg Boeing 747 over the Indian Ocean, and by examining debris, investigators surmised that some material burning at a very high heat, caused an explosion on board. They were able to speculate where the material was, where the fire began, and how it spread.

They do that not only out of curiosity, but for prevention. Airlines want to prevent these disasters, so understanding how faults on planes begin and spread is a crucial way of preventing them from re-occurring. If Aircraft Accident Investigators did not do their work, we would see a lot more crashes, and no one would know how to prevent them.

It's a sad fact of human nature that even though we can be so effective at ensuring safety aboard a machine that travels at 800 km/h at 30 000 feet, we have very little success at ensuring similar safety in another area. In this area of life, fires burn regularly, explosions occur all the time, devastating collisions take place, and casualties mount. It's the area of our relationships. Our marriages, families, friendships, church life, work life, life in civil society. And unlike flying, which occupies a very small part of the life of even the most frequent flyer, our relationships are with us all the time.

In relationships, we have vicious conflict, explosive fights, deep wounds, permanently mangled relationships, raging feuds, burning malice, smouldering bitterness, and yet little in the way of prevention. We don't seem to have Accident Investigators when it comes to relationships. And so life in this world becomes one in which we accept the regular crash and burn of divorce, the ever-present wreckage of divided and feuding families, the smoking remains of churches split by vicious conflict, the awful sight of business torn apart by conflict, nations split by political and racial conflict. Wars, fights, quarrels, conflict and hatred are so part of life, that very few people say, "Where does the fire begin on this aircraft of relationships? Surely we can prevent future disasters if we trace the fire of conflict to a recurring source?"

Our loving Creator asks the question for us and answers it in this passage in James. He is not just the Aircraft Accident Investigator, He is the Designer of the Aircraft, and the perfect Blackbox seeing everything that goes wrong. Here, through the writing of James, the Holy Spirit will tell us exactly why we have sinful conflict in any area of life.

Coming off his discussion of wisdom from above and wisdom from below where James told us that godly wisdom is characterised by humility and peace, it naturally leads him to a discussion of pride

and conflict.

Which one of us wants to live in perpetual conflict? Who does not want the sweetness of peace? But to find it, we will have to listen carefully to James, as he shows us three secrets of conflict: the source of conflict, the course of conflict, and the recourse for conflict.

## **I. The Source of Conflict**

*James 4:1 Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?*

Here is the question in black and white: what is the source, the origin, the cause of the conflict among you? The words for wars and fights have a slightly different meaning. The first word refers to campaigns of war, ongoing long wars that persist. The second word refers to individual skirmishes, once-off battles. That's a significant statement about the kind of conflict we have. God knows we don't only have fights here and there, we also live in ongoing feuds, and bitter relationships of mutual anger. Some married couples are actually in an undeclared war, with various skirmishes and clashes taking place, that simply give an opportunity to express the state of war they are in. Some church members are in a perpetual campaign of resistance to another member, or to a leader, or to the direction of the church, and they are just waiting for the next fire-fight. Some employees live in a cold war of uneasy detente with their employers, but ready to strike should the opportunity arise.

James says where do these relational conflicts actually come from? Where does the fire begin?

To which we say, "Oh, we already know the answer to this question, James. The source of the conflict in my marriage is my pigheaded husband who is always right. The source of conflict is my rebellious teenager always looking for a way to drag his feet. Conflict comes from these maniacs on the road, tailgating and cutting you off. Conflict comes from my demanding wife, from my screaming infant, from my nagging mother, from my lazy employee, from the stubborn church leadership, from the incompetent service, from the corrupt civil servant, from the thieving insurance company, from the apathetic body corporate, from the arrogant board of directors. Thanks James, we already understand where conflict comes from. It comes from other people and life circumstances that invade and disturb our wonderfully dove-like peaceable selves."

To which James might echo the words of Jesus, "Are you still without understanding? Do you still think your problems are around you and outside you? Do you still think sin enters you from the outside? Are you still in self-deception?"

Because here is James's answer: *Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?*

James says, here is where the fire begins: desires to please yourself. Strong desires in your heart to get your own way, to please yourself, to have what you want, and when those desires meet resistance from people or circumstances, they wage war, they conduct battle. When James says these desires are among your members, he means part of your being, parts of your nature. He is not referring to church members, because then we would have a mix up between the result and the cause.

This is the where the fire begins, and it is what keeps the fire burning. Strong desires to please oneself. Just like in chapter 1:13-14, James tells us that sin comes from within, not without. Sinful

conflict comes about because our hearts pursue selfish desires.

This week I watched a small clip of a teacher in Florida who decided to make a practice of praising each of his students one at a time before class, and the story showed how that common-sense approach produced more confidence in the classroom, and even caused some of the children to compliment each other. Well, then the video ended with this caption, "Love is natural, hate is learned." And sadly, there are enough Christians trapped in the sweet sticky world of sentimentality to nod and say "How true" instead of "Nonsense!" Love is not natural to sinners. Hate is natural to sinners, because there is only one thing standing in the way of me getting everything I want and that is every other person on Earth.

Let me give you the Holy Spirit's list of what is natural to the human heart in Romans 1: *wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; (Rom 1:29-31)*

Disagreement comes about because we are different. Disagreement is inevitable and there is nothing sinful about it. Conflict on the other hand is sinful. Conflict doesn't come about because we are different, it comes about because we are sinners in pursuit of our own way.

This is the source of conflict. To understand what James means, we need to understand the course of conflict. We have to understand how that fire begins burning, and how it keeps burning.

## **II. The Course of Conflict**

*2 You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.*

James says, this is how it happens. You lust, you desire something, but you do not get it. Since you do not get it, you hate the person or thing denying it from you, you commit mental murder. You covet, strive for what you want, and cannot obtain, so you fight and war. Still you are without what you want, because you have not prayed.

So here is the progression. We begin with the desire to please self. Now this desire could be a sinful desire, wanting something God has forbidden from you, or wanting to avoid something God has required of you. Loving money, loving another man's spouse, loving your comfort and sleep over necessary duties.

Very often, the desire may not be overtly sinful. A spouse may desire respect from the other, or affection. A parent may desire honour from a child. You may desire a clean home, or an unobstructed ride home, or professional success, or time to be by yourself, or praise for your work, or replacing something old and broken with something new, or more commitment from other church members. The list is endless.

However, a good desire becomes something else, when we begin looking to that thing for a kind of happiness, fulfillment or trust that belongs to God alone. Martin Luther wrote, "To whatever we look for any good thing and for refuge in every need, that is what is meant by 'god.' To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in him from the heart.... To whatever you give your heart and entrust your being, that, I say, is really your god."

What began as a desire, whether that desire was sinful to begin with, or perhaps good, both come

into the service of sin, when we elevate that desire to a place of need. We look to that desire as a need that must be met by circumstances and by others.

Now suddenly the clean house is a need, that can be demanded from others. Success at work is a need that I can demand from my co-workers. A convenient shopping experience is what I can demand from the people working there. A healthy body is a demand I can make on life, and by implication, on God.

Once something is a need, a need that I feel can be legitimately demanded from whomever or whatever stands in my way, the next inevitable step will be punishment and war with those who don't meet the demands.

I can now punish my spouse with anger, coldness, harsh words, insults, withdrawals, manipulation as punishment for not meeting my demand. I can exact vengeance on my child in the form of belittling words, correction in anger, raised voice and shouting. I punish my opponent with a long-winded email detailing in the minutest details how wrong they are and how right I am. I phone and I threaten, and intimidate, and try to overwhelm with abrasive force.

And the problem is, because I still think my original desire is so justified, I feel my angry punishment is all the more justified. Listen to the language, "Is it too much to expect" "All I am asking for is" "After all I have done, the least you could do." "I only want what is good and right." And because what I want is far more justified than what you want, you are clearly the problem, and I am the solution. Do what I want, do it my way, please me, meet my demands, and the war is over."

The heart is above all things deceitful and desperately wicked, who can know it?

Cain began with a desire to worship God, it seems. He wanted his sacrifice to be accepted. But it wasn't. As they walked away from that sacrifice, Abel's had been accepted, but Cain's had not. And Cain's face fell. He walked away with a scowl. All I wanted was to have my sacrifice accepted. Is that so much to ask? God said to him, "Why sulk about it? Do what is right, and your sacrifice will be accepted." And now Cain had a choice, to submit his desire to God, and to repent of what he had done wrong, or to keep insisting on his own way.

But Cain was so committed to doing worship his own way, so badly did he want God to accept him on his own terms, that his desire became a demand. And since he could not force God to accept his sacrifice, he could at least take vengeance on Abel, and remove the person who had been a rival to his getting his own way.

When we are in the middle of seeking our own way, we are as independent as can be.

And that independence leads to two possible responses to God: we don't pray, or we pray selfishly. *Yet you do not have because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.*

A lot of the time, we don't have because we haven't asked. After all, Jesus said:

*"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.*

But independent people don't ask. On the other hand, James says, when you are controlled by a selfish desire, when you do ask, you are asking God to assist you in the pursuit of your selfishness, so He won't answer.

This is when we pray, "God, please remove this person from my life." "God, show them how wrong

they are.” “Lord, let my spouse become the sort of person I want them to be.” “Please let this person get fired.”

As we'll see in a moment, prayer is actually a big part of preventing disagreements or frustrations from turning into conflict. But prayerlessness or selfish prayer is just one more stage on the course of conflict.

Good desires become bad desires when we pursue them as if they are our only desire. But God has the remedy.

### III. The Recourse for Conflict

*4 Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. 5 Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"? 6 But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.*

At first glance, it might seem as if James has begun a new section, but he hasn't. These words here are the way James is diagnosing the problem and calling us to repent. At the very heart of sinful conflict is this selfish pursuit of my own way. A selfish pursuit of my own way is actually a philosophy of life, and the Bible calls that philosophy *worldliness*.

What is worldliness? **1Jo 2:15** *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life is not of the Father but is of the world.*

Who is the god of this world? Once, Jesus spoke to the Jewish leaders who were intent on killing him. He said this to them:

**Joh 8:44** *"You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning.*

How was Satan a murderer from the beginning? From the moment he became Satan, he was in hot pursuit of his own way. And how does he respond to those who do not give him the worship and glory he desires? He hates them and would destroy them all if he could.

The two families of the world, that represent two ways – devotion to self or worship of God. The world's way is one of pursuing your own way. The way of the world is the way of Cain, seeking your way and destroying those who stand in your way.

When you vigorously pursue your own way, you are worldly. It doesn't matter how Christian your movie or music collection may be, if your life revolves around self-gratification rather than love for God and love for neighbour, then you may as well be a card-carrying member of the world system. Worldliness is loving self more than God and it provokes His jealousy. Verse 5 is notoriously difficult to translate, but I think the best is what we have here: The Spirit of God dwelling in us jealousy yearns for us to seek Him, to be devoted wholly to Him.

When I have sinful conflict in my life, it is because I am devoted to someone more than Christ, and that is self. See how James always makes us test our hearts by our actions? He makes us test our hearing of the Word with our doing, he makes us test our faith with our works, he makes us test our wisdom by our fruit, and here he makes us test our true devotion by the war or the peace that characterises our lives. If conflict ignites everywhere I go, I can say one thing for sure about myself

– I am worldly in orientation. There is someone in my life I consistently love more than Christ.

Christ came to save us from the Devil's family. God came to rescue us from the way of Satan, the way of worldliness and self-devotion. He came to deliver us into His kingdom, with His peace. He told us 27 *"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. (Joh 14:27)*

To have His peace, we have to stop fighting for our own way, and allow someone else to have victory. The irony of ending conflict is that you have to let someone else win. That person is Christ. We come to His peace, when we surrender to His lordship, allow Him to rule us, and accept His way over us. This is what salvation is for, to die to self and to live for Christ.

Let me show you how this works.

You see, if instead of being devoted to getting our own way, we were devoted to getting His way, if instead of being devoted to pleasing self, we were devoted to pleasing Him, what might happen to our conflicts?

First, we would repent of sinful desires. The things we know we shouldn't pursue could be stopped at the door.

Second, we would keep good desires from growing into monstrous idols. We might want the clean home, the unobstructed ride home, the professional success, the time to be by yourself, the affection from your spouse, the obedience from the child. But now you get to see it not with reference to self, but with reference to God. Would it please God if this happened? Would this glorify God? Does God want this to happen? Does He want this to happen with the same intensity that I do? Does God care more about me getting this thing or about how I respond if I don't? Is it possible God may deny me this thing? Is it possible I may need to defer to another's wishes, or exercise patience, so as to please God?

Now my loyalty is not myself, but to Him. And this is the promise of verse 5 – He gives more grace. To whom does He give it? Not to the independent, but to those who have humbled themselves to seek to please God more than anything else.

And this is where prayer comes in. James told us when independent we either don't pray, or we pray selfishly. But when we are humble, when we are forsaking worldliness, we use prayer to submit our desires to the greater glory of God. We pray, Lord, hallowed be Your name, not mine. Your kingdom come, not mine. You will be done, not mine. So I submit this thing I want, from my spouse, or my church, or this neighbour, or my colleague, or this country, to God. God, give me this thing, if it is your will. I will go after it, but only using ways and methods that please you. Once I cross over that line, I am no longer loyal to You, devoted to You. Once I introduce selfish conflict, I am loyal to self, pleasing myself, having turned my desires into my gods, and demanding others worship. Please Lord, help me to love only what You love. Help me to love it as you love it, with the intensity you love it, not giving it any more value or intensity than You do.

To that humble heart, God gives grace. The humility that seeks to love and please God becomes the fire extinguisher that puts out the fire of sinful conflict before it starts, or before it grows and spreads.

In an old monastery in Germany, there's said to be kept a pair of antlers. Supposedly two deer were fighting, and having locked horns, they became so interlocked that they became jammed together,

and could not be separated. Apparently the deer died with locked horns. That's a good picture of what Paul means when he says of sinful conflict: *15 But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another! (Gal 5:15)*

Who wants this kind of earthly, sensual, demonic wisdom? Who wants this worldly way of life? Let us forsake rabid devotion to self, and pursue the love for God that brings love and peace with neighbour.