

Resolving Conflict Biblically

We live in a world of conflict. Nation against nation, ethnic group against ethnic group, man against man, man against woman, child against adult and adult against child. Conflict is part of the lot of sinful men. Sadly, though, God's children are all too often dogged by conflict as well – in churches, families and relationships.

Is there a biblical guide to resolving conflict? Is there a way to have harmonious relationships? There is, and it is found in **James 4**. Here, James introduces us to the description of conflict.

From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts. Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.

James 4:1-4

James describes conflict as the result of unmet desires that consume human beings. Conflict comes as a result of desires. Two people or parties have differing desires. Either one person is not meeting the other person's desire, or they have desires that pull in different directions. The strong desire fuels the human's sinful urge to kill, fight and war to meet their selfish desire.

Whether it be a marriage, a parent-child relationship, a church situation, a work situation, going right through the realm of human existence – conflicts are caused when humans have desires that are at odds with each other. Sometimes the desires may be wrong, sometimes they may not. Ultimately, it is the human heart's infinite capacity to lust that will provide this world with an inexhaustible supply of conflict. However, to know how to deal with conflict, we need to go a bit deeper.

The dynamics of conflict

It begins with desire: 'I want something.' However, as this desire grows, it becomes dependence: 'I need to have this thing.' From there it becomes a demand: 'I must have it, or you must provide it.' When this does not happen, it becomes disappointment: 'You were supposed to...' – and from there punishment, anger, fighting – in short – conflict.

The desire may not be necessarily sinful in itself. The sin is that the desire does not remain submitted to God. For example: A wife may desire affection from her husband. This is a legitimate desire. However, as her desire grows, she begins to see it as something she is dependent on – it's a need. Now, instead of gratitude for affection received, she is demanding it in her heart.

With such an attitude, when the husband fails to provide it, there is deep disappointment, for which she punishes him – with silent treatment, or a cold shoulder, or a cold meal. Of course, this only adds to the conflict, for he will retaliate. From the husband's side, he may have a desire to feel significant or appreciated by his wife – also a legitimate desire.

However, the more he focuses on this desire, the more he regards it as a crucial need in his life, which he sees his wife as not meeting. His heart is now demanding that she give it, even if he never admits this out loud. When she does not give it, he is deeply disappointed and resents her for withholding something he'd begun to regard as his right. He punishes her by withholding the thing she wants – affection. And so you have a cycle of conflict that will continue and probably get worse. Desire – dependence – demand – disappointment – conflict.

The problem is not the desires to begin with. The problem is that the desires become idolatrous. Really, all the wife wants to feel is feminine, and all the husband wants to feel is masculine. The problem is that they have exalted themselves in their own eyes, till they saw their desires as rights, and demanded that others meet them with inner arrogance.

In the eyes of a proud person, the only way to resolve the conflict is if you meet my desire! An argumentative person can only see the resolution of the argument if you agree with them! James says, *'Ye desire, and have not – ye kill, and desire to have and cannot obtain.'* He's saying that the real problem behind conflict is the intense love we have for ourselves, that makes us pursue those desires at all costs.

The problem is not always the desire to begin with, but the selfishness that corrupts that desire into an idol. As we move further from submission to God and closer to self-exaltation, the more justified we feel in our demand for this desire, and the more we will fight to have that desire met. Indeed, the more justified we feel for the conflict itself – after all, in our eyes, we have been robbed. Consequently, the conflict will be as great as the selfish desire in each heart.

See, we might imagine another scenario. A teenager walks into the house and doesn't even greet his father. The father explodes into a fit of rage about his son's total lack of respect. The son rages back about the father's total lack of understanding about him, and how he is intruding upon his independence. Once again, there are desires at war.

The father has a desire for respect – a legitimate desire. The son has a desire for some privacy – a legitimate desire within certain limits, since he is living under his father's house. Now, what could have been an opportunity for growing in the relationship has in fact caused another tear in it. Why? Because father and son both have idols in their hearts. The son kicked down Dad's idol, and Dad kicked down the son's idol, and they are furious at each other.

See, the son's lack of respect is a real sin issue that must be dealt with. But what the father does not see is that his own desire for respect has become the most important thing to him, more important than his son himself. What could have been a chance to deal with that sin in the youngster's life, has instead become a display of fleshliness by both.

The father's legitimate desire for respect became a need, and eventually a demand, which caused great disappointment and resentment when not provided, resulting in a selfish fury. What the father cannot see is that he has become so great in his own eyes, that he thinks legitimate desires can be pursued with fleshly, sinful anger. His desire has overwhelmed the bigger picture – a God-glorifying family. His pride is doing what it does best: justifying himself.

The son, while being fleshly himself, has a desire for independence which he has allowed to grow out of all proportion. He now sees independence as his right as a teenager, and regards his parents as intruding upon that right. When they do this, he resents them and punishes them with more rebellion. The problem is his idolatrous heart – he loves himself so much that he has allowed a legitimate desire to grow into the most important thing for him at that time.

When we have warring desires like this, how do we resolve the conflict? Now, the world will tell you that there needs to be a compromise. The teen needs to get some independence, and the father needs to get some respect. So we give each party a bit of their desires, and that supposedly solves the conflict. From our earlier example: the husband needs to be more tender, the wife more appreciative, and then they can both go back to their corners.

In fact, compromise is the opposite of what will solve the conflict, because the sinful tendencies in both father and son have not been addressed. The situation will re-occur because no one is addressing the heart issues.

In fact, by counselling advice like 'compromise', we have fed the sinful desires, thinking that if we feed the angry cries of the flesh, it will die down. But Solomon warns us in **Proverbs 27:20**: *"Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied."* It's like giving a child what they want when they throw a tantrum: you are rewarding fleshly behaviour.

No, the real issue here is the heart. In any conflict situation, there needs to be an internal examination: what is the desire in my heart now, that is being threatened or unmet by the person I'm in conflict with? Why is it so important to me?

Identifying the desire at work is the foundation of resolving the conflict. Very often, you will find two people fighting over absolutely meaningless, mindless detail. The fight will go on and on. That's because, in the one's heart, there is a desire – a desire to appear correct and intelligent. In the other, there may be the same desire, or a desire to prove they are not that way. This is the lust raging between the two, not the actual details they are arguing about. Until they address the heart issues, they will continue to go in circles.

James gives us the solution. He links this idolatrous desiring to being a friend of the world. Why? Because a worldly person is one who has not submitted their desires to God. They are still wavering between pleasing self – through the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes and the pride of life – and pleasing God. They are committing spiritual adultery, by loving something more than God – that is, themselves.

This is the heart of a person who will create conflict endlessly. They cannot see that the cause of the conflict is not the other person, it is their own heart which wants its desires met at all

costs. Here comes James' advice: *"Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God"* (**James 4:6**).

The one who wants his desire met above the needs of the other person is proud. They are not in submission to God, for God commands us to love our neighbour as ourselves. The one who places other's needs above their own is humble. James says, you need to humble yourself. You first have to come down from the place of self-exaltation which has made you believe that your desire is actually a need which you have the right to demand, and even the right to defend or punish as others refuse to meet your need.

A world filled with proud people all believing their desires are the most important, and others must meet them – is a world filled with conflict, and such we have. First come down from that place. It's a terrible way to live – striving. Always striving to make sure your neighbour doesn't kick down your idol, which of course, he delights to do. It's not a place of rest. It's a place of restlessness – pursuing your desires at all costs, and fighting off those who interfere.

Humility surrenders its rights, and regards its desires as things which may or may not be met by the grace of God.

We are to submit to God

Submission to God means making sure His pleasure and glory is once again our chief desire. Whatever desire is in our heart, submitting to God means bringing that desire before the throne of God, and making sure it is submitting to a superior, larger, stronger desire – to please God.

See, let's take our husband and wife example. His desire was for appreciation or praise. Her desire was for affection. The husband, when submitting to God, will say, 'My desire for appreciation from my wife is legitimate. But greater than that desire is my desire to please God. God will be most pleased if I love my wife as Christ loved the church. I need to show her that.'

Now, we might say, 'What about his desire?' Firstly, that desire is no longer ruling him as it did – it's not an idol anymore, causing him distress and pain; and secondly, as he goes to meet his wife's needs, he'll probably find the very appreciation he was looking for! The conflict has had its teeth pulled out.

Likewise, the wife who wanted affection, would say, 'My desire for affection is real, but more than affection, I want to please God. God is most pleased, according to the Bible, when I honour my husband.' Now, she is no longer ruled by that desire, it is not dominating her relationship with her husband. Her desire is submitted to a greater desire – to please God.

Even if her desire is not met, she can have the joy of pleasing God – probably a far greater joy than the affection her husband might give her. And when she honours her husband, he will probably give her that affection.

Or let us look at our father and son example. The father wants respect. When his son denies it from him, the father must submit his desire to God. He can say, 'I want respect from my son, and that is right. But more than that, I want to please God in this situation. God will be most pleased if I am a godly father who does not provoke his child to anger. His sin of disrespect will destroy him, and God wants me to act firmly but tenderly to show him his sin, and exercise discipline.'

As hard as it may be, the father's submission of his original desire will give him the meek and godly spirit that will provide him with authority for speaking to his son about his disrespect. His son will be far more open to a humble father, than a screaming proud one. After all, when the father reacts in selfish anger, the son simply thinks, 'You're being selfish, why can't I be?' But when the father is clearly dying to his own desire to place his desire for respect above all, good overcomes evil.

Likewise the son. If he was submitted to God, his desire for independence would have perspective and proportion. He would think, 'I want to be more independent. But more than that, I want to please God. God is most pleased with me when I honour my father and mother – that I will do, and trust God for the rest.'

Once again, he will no longer be ruled by his desire for independence, for he has submitted it to a greater desire. He can have joy and peace in the home, even if his desire has not been met all the ways he would have liked. More than likely, his godly behaviour will cause his parents to trust him with more.

But please note, we do not submit our desires to God to get our own way, That is self-deception. We submit our desires to God because of who He is. To submit to God to get your own way is to allow the selfish heart to continue unchallenged, and in fact, unsubmitted.

In any conflict situation, the desires of the heart have to be brought under a greater desire – the desire to please God. Now does that mean there will be perfect agreement after that? No, but disagreeing is quite different to conflict. You can disagree without fighting. Marriages can have many disagreements, without there being endless conflict. Conflict is related to lusting-desiring strongly as a result of loving ourselves so intensely. The solution is to submit to God in humility, which means loving God first, others second, and self, last.

It means meeting other's needs at our own expense. That's the dynamics of conflict, and how to cut it at the root. However, when we do that, there are still attitudes that need to be present to make sure the disagreements which we will inevitably have do not become conflicts. We can call this:

The details of resolving conflict

When we submit to God in this way, we will have the spirit of wisdom that James speaks of in chapter 3:

But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

James 3:14-17

Striving conflict is evidence of selfish, sensual hearts. Submitted hearts will exhibit godly wisdom. This wisdom has seven characteristics:

1. A submitted heart will, firstly, be **pure** in a disagreement. It will not have ulterior motives to try and trick the other or exalt self. It is sincere, and truthful. Honesty and humility go together. Pride and deception are also bedfellows.
2. Secondly, James says a submitted heart will be **peaceable**. This heart desires peace. It wants harmony. A restless, unsubmitted heart actually craves conflict sometimes. **Proverbs 22:10** says, *"Cast out the scorner, and contention shall go out; yea, strife and reproach shall cease."* The rebellious heart looks for strife, whereas a heart under God is a peacemaker. It loves peace.
3. The third attitude we will have when we develop this heavenly wisdom is we will be **gentle**. Much conflict is simply inflamed because of a lack of gentleness in a disagreement. The way you say something is as important as what you say. **Proverbs 15:1** says, *"A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger."* Likewise, **Proverbs 10:12** says, *"Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins."*

It is unlikely that you have a feeling of love in your heart when you are violent with another – verbally or otherwise. Hatred is present. Even discipline of children can and must be done with gentleness of spirit. It is hatred, even if momentary, that causes a harsh, ugly spirit, which is the opposite of gentleness.

4. The fourth aspect of the conflict resolving kind of wisdom is that it will be easy to be entreated. That means it is compliant – **reasonable**. It is not stubborn. It listens before it responds. It does not interrupt, or cut you off. It does not simply wait for you to finish your sentence so it can jump in with its ideas. It is humbly listening, and replying.

Proverbs again warns the stubborn man: *"The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise"* (**Proverbs 12:15**) A sure way to make sure you never resolve conflict is to be wise in your own conceit. The reason for arguing is that you think you are right and the other is wrong.

Simple logic tells us that if neither of you are open to the reverse being true – it is pointless to even bother arguing. If you both believe you are right, and are not open to the idea you are not, then why waste your time? No, the wisdom from above is reasonable – open to listening, and being corrected.

5. The fifth aspect of this kind of wisdom is that it is **full of mercy and good fruits**. This means it is merciful and good. There is a kindness to it. **Proverbs 19:11** says, *"The discretion of a man deferreth his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression."* This mercy allows for the faults and mistakes of others to go, without bringing each and every one up. It offers the same kind of patience and mercy that God gives us.

Love covereth sins – not by pretending they are not there, but by forgiving. Unforgiveness is one of the main reasons for continual conflict. This kind of mercy forgives easily. Its love for the other person delights to forgive them, to forbear with them, and to be longsuffering with them. **Proverbs 24:29** warns, *'Say not, I will do so to him as he hath done to me: I will render to the man according to his work.'* This kind of wisdom isn't keeping score, it is dedicated to canceling debts.

6. The sixth aspect of this wisdom is that it is **impartial and unwavering**. In other words, it has its eyes set firmly on loving another person. It does not unfairly give preference to something or someone else. This kind of heart is not divided and insincere. It is truthful with the person it is dealing with. It treats them as they ought to be treated, not less.
7. That leads us to the seventh aspect of this kind of wisdom – **without hypocrisy**. Hypocrisy is seeking to gain the approval of others by pretending to be something you are not. It is putting up an appearance to mask the true state of your heart. If you have ever debated with a hypocrite, you will know how frustrating it is, for they have numerous diversion tactics, blame-shifting, 'what about you?' questions, and so on.

This kind of person is committed to preserving a front; dedicated to upholding a good image. They lack the ability to lower the mask and be vulnerable. Humble wisdom says, 'This is who I am, faults and all. Humility may end a sentence with the words, 'There, now you see how bad I truly am.'

Now, with that sevenfold kind of wisdom, we have the kind of spirit that not only avoids conflict, but resolves disagreements in a God-pleasing way. We are pure and sincere, desiring peace with the other, being gentle in our demeanour and speech, being reasonable and open to being corrected, merciful and forgiving, impartial, and finally humble and without pretence. Such a person will resolve disagreements gracefully, so that they never become ugly conflicts.

Proverbs 17:14 says, *"The beginning of strife is as when one letteth out water: therefore leave off contention, before it be meddled with."* Just like a leak in a water storage device will grow into a bigger hole and finally burst, so strife will start small, and eventually flood in. Wisdom seeks to resolve conflict biblically.

In the beautiful **Song of Solomon 2:15**, it says, *"Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes."* It is so often the little foxes – the little conflicts that are not dealt with biblically – that erode a relationship till it is barren.

We need to make the effort to overcome conflict. We do that by understanding the description of conflict. It is really two desires at war. We must then address the dynamics of conflict. It begins with a desire becoming a need, eventually a demand – and when not met – a disappointment which we punish others for.

We must see the problem here is our pride – we love ourselves so much that we have exalted our desires to places they do not belong. That is what is causing the conflict. We address that by humbling ourselves, and submitting the desire to a greater desire – the desire to please God. From there, we can address the disagreement with wisdom from above – pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, merciful, impartial, and without pretence.

God's people ought to be known as ones who are wise as serpents, but as gentle as doves. How sad to see so many churches, Christian marriages and families with conflict characterised by harshness, cruelty, stubbornness, unforgiveness, partiality and hypocrisy. As **James 3:10** puts it, *"My brethren, these things ought not so to be."*

Let us then die to self, submit to God, and allow the peace of God to rule in our hearts, our families and our churches.