

War and Peace

James 4:1-10

David H. Roper

What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you?

That is an excellent question! Countless dollars and man hours have been expended trying to find a solution to that problem. And yet we are no closer to a solution today than we were on the day that Cain slew Abel. The world is filled with conflict and suffering and warfare. How can you explain this terrible war in Southeast Asia that has dragged on and on? How can you explain what happened in Biafra, what is happening in Ireland, and the horrible clashes between Pakistan and India? Why is the world torn by strife and conflict? How can you explain the unrest and hostility here in the United States? And how do you explain the battle in our own homes?

James says that the problem originates within man. There is something desperately wrong with man. Man is the great enemy of mankind. As Pogo says, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Man is the problem. Paul says in II Timothy 3 that the last days will be dangerous, perilous times because men will be lovers of self rather than lovers of God. It is man that causes the distress in the world. It is man that is behind all antisocial behavior. It is man that is behind all forms of conflict, whether it be global warfare or fighting in our homes and businesses between husband and wife, children and parents, or between employers and employees. You see, there is a warfare going on in our own hearts. And all the conflict outside is simply an extension of the conflict that is inside.

James answers his rhetorical question in the latter part of verse 1:

Is it not your passions that are at war in your members?

He says that strife grows out of the passions that are waging war within us. The word translated "passions" is a neutral term. He is not saying that these desires are necessarily bad. He is talking about legitimate desires -- the desire for freedom from oppression, the desire for health, the desire to have a mate, or to have children, or to have some physical need satisfied. These are legitimate drives. But conflict results whenever these desires are thwarted or frustrated.

You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war.

These desires may be perfectly legitimate. But when we are frustrated by our circumstances, or when someone else with a similar desire cuts across our path and keeps us from fulfilling our own desires, combat ensues. And with sufficient provocation we will even kill! There is tremendous violence pent up inside us and if we are driven far enough we will destroy another person. One of the justices of the United States Supreme Court, made the statement last week that the only difference between the man on death row and the man on the street is a difference in what they do, not a difference in what men are. Every one of us is a potential killer. If driven hard enough and frustrated over a long enough period of time we will destroy in order to achieve our ends.

You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

Now, this is the way James' argument is developing. All of us have certain desires, many of them legitimate. But often we are frustrated in the expression of these desires. When we are frustrated, we have two options. We can either assert ourselves and get what we want by ourselves, and thus cause conflict and destruction - or we can ask God. And if we ask God he delights to give.

There are some wonderful things said about prayer in this passage. Last week I read a quotation from Hegesippus, a second century historian, who described James as a man whose knees were hardened because of the protracted periods of time that he prayed. James was a man who knew from experience what prayer is. His teaching on prayer is therefore very practical. He says two things about prayer, essentially, in verses 2 and 3.

The first is that God wants us to ask. It delights the heart of the Father when we do. Jesus pointed out that any of us who is a father would not give a stone to our son if he asked us for a piece of bread, nor a serpent if he asked for a fish. "If you who are evil," he said, "know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your, heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him!" He is a Father who wants to give, who wants us to ask him for the things we need. It delights him to answer.

I am reminded of the story of a man who stood up in a prayer meeting to pray one of those long, windy, theological prayers. He introduced it with, "Oh, Thou great God who sittest on the circle of the earth, before whom the inhabitants are like grasshoppers." A lady seated behind him began to tug on the back of his jacket and said, "Just call him 'Father' and ask him for something." That is the kind of heavenly Father we have. It delights his heart to give. So the first thing James says is that when our desires are frustrated we are to ask the Father.

But, second, we are to ask according to his will. You see, it is possible to presume to use the Father to accomplish our own ends. We can attempt to misuse his power to accomplish our program. We want our desires met according to our schedule and in keeping with our way. But that may not be God's way.

Therefore when we ask, we have to be willing to pray according to the Father's will. We must be willing to say, "Lord, this is what I want, this is my desire, but nevertheless, not my will but your will be done."

This is the way the Lord Jesus prayed in the garden. He had a very real fear of the cross. He didn't want to undergo that horrible death. His desire to preserve his own life was very legitimate. And so he prayed, "Father, if it is possible, I ask that this cup pass from me, Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done."

When we are frustrated, but we know that our desires are legitimate, we are to take them to the Father. But we are to do so with the attitude, "Lord, in your own time, and in your own way." A friend of mine used to tell the story of a man who was on his rooftop fixing the television antenna. He lost his footing and as he slid off the roof he managed to grab hold of the gutter. He found himself hanging about twenty feet off the ground and so he began to shout for help. But there was no one there to help him and so, looking up into the sky, he said, "Is there anybody up there who can help me." And a voice came out of the sky, "I can help." "What should I do?", the man asked. The voice from above said, "Let go." The man thought a moment and cried out, "Is there anybody *else* up there who can help me?"

All too often that is the way we pray. We say, "Lord, help me." And God says, "I will in my own way and in my own time." And so we start casting about for another solution instead of submitting to his will. When we insist upon asserting our own way, a number of things become apparent. Verse 4:

Unfaithful creatures! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is in vain

that the scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us?"

The most obvious thing is that we become a *friend of the world*. A self-assertiveness is the essence of worldliness. That is the world's creed: if you want to get ahead, then do it for yourself. No one else will do it for you. You have to claw and kick your way to the top of the heap. You only go around once, so you have to grab the brass ring. You have got to get what you want out of life. James says that when we feel that we have to get what we desire by asserting our self; then we ally our self with the world and with its philosophy, and thus we become an *enemy of God*. Why God's enemy? Because God wants to bring peace and reconciliation to the world. But the world's way always produces conflict and bitterness and strife. So when we choose to assert our self we constitute our self an enemy of God.

And what is far worse, James says, we become adulteresses, The word translated "unfaithful creatures" in verse 4 is actually the Greek word for adulteresses. Men, how would you feel if your wife got \$50 from the man next door when she needed money to buy clothes? Or if, when she needed counsel or help or assurance or anything else, she went to all the other men in the neighborhood instead of coming to you? It would break your heart. And that is what this does to God. It breaks his heart when we go the world's way. It is as if we are saying, "Lord, you are not adequate. Your way is not the right way; it's not the best way for me. I am going to have to get what I want by myself." James says the result of this attitude is that we become adulterous and, predictably, God gets jealous!

The scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us."

A theme repeated throughout the Old Testament is that God is a jealous husband toward his people. His is a righteous jealousy, because his bride belongs to him alone. So when we are adulterous it makes him jealous. But the amazing thing is that his jealousy creates in him a desire not to condemn us but to give us greater grace. He doesn't cut us off. In verse 6 James says,

But he gives more grace . . .

That is the kind of heavenly husband we have. When we have gone the world's way and have become adulterous he pours his grace out to us. And the rest of this passage, from verse 6 through verse 10, is an account of how we can receive that grace.

Let's review Jesus' argument to this point. He says that we all have certain legitimate needs and that often these needs are frustrated. When we are frustrated, we can go in one of two directions. We can either ask the Father, ask according to his will, and wait for him to meet our needs according to his own time and in his own way -- or we can resort to our own strength and assert our self. Causing chaos and conflict and thus becoming adulterous. If we have done the latter, how then can we respond again to the grace of God and return to the place of fellowship? James tells us in verses 6 through 10:

. . . therefore it [Scripture] says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace in the humble." Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands you sinners, and purify your hearts, you men of double mind. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.

Note that this section is bracketed by the word "humble" -- "humble yourself". Verses 7, 8 and 9 are essentially a description of how that humbling takes place. It begins by submitting ourselves to God. Are we willing to let God be God? Are we willing to let him do whatever he pleases? Can we submit to his program for our life and

his way of working things out in it? Does God have that right? Doesn't God have the right to determine your circumstances, your marriage state, or your unmarried state, your health, your job situation? Isn't he the potter? And aren't we the clay?

One of the most powerful parables in the gospels is the story of the man who went into the marketplace and hired men to work in his vineyard. He went at six in the morning and hired some, went again at nine and hired others, and again at twelve, at three, and at five. In the evening he paid all his workers. When they came for the accounting they all received the same wage. Each received a day's wages, as agreed. Those who had borne the heat and the burden of the day were resentful. They said, "We should have had more. We had to work in the middle of the day when it was hot. We suffered. You are not being fair." But the husbandman said, "Don't I have the right to do as I please with my vineyard?" Doesn't God have that right? Certainly he does! And all we can do is to respond by saying, "Lord, you have that right," and then submit to him.

James says that by submitting to him we resist the Devil. The Devil's philosophy is, "Assert yourself." He is behind the world's philosophy. It was the Devil's desire for self-assertion which caused him to fall, and he is the one who has infected the human race with that attitude. It occurs to me that there are only two options in life. If we are submitting to God, then we are resisting the Devil. Or, we are submitting to the Devil, and thus we are resisting God. If we are submitting to God, the result will be peace and harmony. If we are submitting to the Devil, the result will be conflict and hostility.

The next step, James says, is to draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Start laying hold of his resources, He is the one who sustains us in any circumstance. You see, it may be his will not to remove the inhibiting factors, and thus to prevent you from realizing your desires. And yet in the midst of that frustrating circumstance he will give more grace. He supplies all that we need and ministers to us richly. He provides the strength and the patience **to** endure. James says that it is during these times, you draw near to God . . . he will draw near to you. You will find him faithful. He will never abandon you. He will provide everything you need.

Then he says that we must cleanse our minds and purify our hearts. He is speaking here of the attitudes and the actions which cause conflict. Start with your attitudes. "Purify your heart," i.e., let God deal with the inner man. And then "cleanse your hands", i.e., deal with the actions which cause dissension. Perhaps there is some restitution that you will have to make. Perhaps you need to declare a treaty with someone you have been waging war with. There may be other actions that you will have to take, but deal with the notions which have caused conflict.

In verse 9 James says:

Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to dejection.

That is, take these faulty attitudes and actions seriously. Don't treat them lightly. An unjudged self-assertive attitude or action can touch off the most devastating conflict, So don't blithely dismiss this exhortation. This is not just good advice, not just a pleasant sentiment that he is expressing. We must let the Spirit of God deal with the attitudes and actions which cause conflict.

Finally, by way of summary, James says,

Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will exalt you.

Let him exalt you. Don't try to exalt yourself. In Philippians 2 Paul says of Jesus that, though he was in the

form of God, he did not consider equality with God something to be forcibly retained, but instead he emptied himself and he took upon himself the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of men. And being found in fashion as a man, Paul says, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death on the cross. The Lord had to go to that place of death, and that is where we have to go. We have to be willing to take our most legitimate needs and desires and drives and ambitions and put them to death. Because Jesus was willing to do that, God has exalted him highly and has given Him the name which is above every name. The Father exalted him because he was willing to submit to the Father. And the Father will exalt us, if we are willing to submit to his will.

Father, we thank you for these mighty words from this chapter. We know that they are true. We thank you that you are a Father who pours out grace to us. You are the One who gives us the will and the power to submit our wills to you and accept whatever comes from your hand, Thank you, Lord, for that sense of exaltation and quietness of heart which comes from submitting to you, and humbling ourselves under your hand. We thank you in Christ's name, amen.

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