

Part Seven: Why Fights and Quarrels

Written by Bob Stone

James 4:1-10

One of the great tragedies in the church world today is what is commonly known as a church fight. It is nothing new, however; Paul had to deal with this kind of situation in Corinth. He had made two visits to this community, had sent emissaries, and had written two letters in order to correct the sins of that community.

In 2 Corinthians 12:20, Paul ends his second letter with the following statement:

"For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder."

We don't know for sure if Paul's fears were realized, but we do know that today in church after church, conflicts are raging just as Paul feared would continue in Corinth. What a tragedy! When there is a whole world desperately needing to know about Jesus and His saving grace, His church is fighting amongst itself. The energy that could and should be devoted to ministering life to fellow believers, and Christ's love and grace to those outside the faith, is diverted to fighting and quarreling. It's no wonder that in many communities the name of Christ is slandered because His people can't get along. That should never be!

Of equal concern are the relational conflicts between Christians in families, friendships and in the marketplace. This study is designed to give us understanding of this tragedy and how it can be avoided. It is not intended to be an exhaustive study, but hopefully it will be enough to give us insight into how a church fight and other relational difficulties can be avoided and how we might give counsel to others involved in one.

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The format for this study will call for your involvement. The passages together.

We will be asking questions of the

Overall Church and Relational Dysfunction

James 4:1-10

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? 2 You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.

3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. 4 You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. 5 Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? 6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

What is the source of fights, quarrels & disorder in a church and relationships? (See v. 1b) They come from our desires/passions that battle within us! (Desires can be good or bad; it all bad depends on the context.) The primary source of the battle is first within individuals, where all fights begin. That means, then, the cure and prevention must go to the source—the heart. Not concepts, theology or facts, *but desires* are the source of this dysfunction.

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What are these conflicts about? We don't know specifically, only the result—v. 2b. "Fights" denotes chronic hostility/wars; "quarrels/conflicts" refer to individual battles. The desires at the root of the battle come because we don't get what we want. What do we do?

- We kill in our heart—Matt. 5:22 (anger).
- We covet because we can't have our wants. This means we earnestly desire or long for what someone else has—e.g., their things or position.

Quarreling and fighting are often initiated and perpetrated by a sin not mentioned here (gossip, slander). The problem is, those participating in the fight don't always see it as sin. It's just a weapon in their battle. To slander means to speak evil of, defame—4:11. To gossip means to whisper poisonous reports in private that would be said to the person talked about—Rom. 3:8; 2 Tim. 3:8; Titus 3:8. Basically, in fights and quarrels, we wound with words. What does God think about fights and quarrels? James 4:11; Prov. 6:16-19; 26:20; Eph. 4:31-32; Tit. 3:1-2; 1 Cor. 5:11; 6:10.

Those being addressed here are not receiving what they want, for a number of reasons mentioned in verses 2b-6.

They do not ask God!

This person feels the best way to get something is through discussion, dialogue, argument, and pressure tactics, and would rather fight than pray. What would prayerfulness do to the desires that battle within us? How would prayer affect the battle? Prayer changes us. It gets us in line with God's heart, calms our anger, and changes coveting to thanksgiving. I'd like to tell people involved in an argument to have a moratorium on arguing and pray for one month.

What's the reason (v. 3) for not receiving, even when a person eventually asks God?

They are asking with wrong motives.

Their prayer becomes only a way to get their own desires/pleasures fulfilled—v. 3b; Mt.

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6:9-10. Their prayers are filled with wrong motives (see v. 3b) because their *friendship with the world* affects motives, prayers, and their relationships with God. It focuses their attention on themselves and the values of the world—not the kingdom of God. They may not even recognize their desires and attitudes are those of a worldly value system. Friendship with the world causes us to say: "My desires are the most important of all! What I want is most important."

Mark it down. Anyone involved in quarreling, fighting, killing and coveting is not involved in sincere prayer, but selfish prayer.

Friendship with the world makes a person an enemy of God

because God considers friendship with the world as adultery and hatred toward God!—v. 4a. In the Old Testament, when Israel got involved with idols/other (g)ods—it was called adultery, too (Jer. 3:20). "*Like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel.*" Likewise, James uses the same image to characterize his readers seeking friendship with the world. They are, in effect, committing "spiritual adultery" and making themselves enemies of God.

The Tyndale commentary writes a powerful comment on this verse: "God must judge those who break their covenant vows to Him. Certainly James' readers were not overtly disclaiming God and consciously deciding to follow the world instead. But their... attitudes amounted to just that. God will brook [have] no rival, and when the believer behaves in a way characteristic of the world, he demonstrates that, at that point, his allegiance is to the world rather than to God. By drawing out the ultimate consequences of worldly behavior in this way, James seeks to prick the consciences of his readers and to stimulate repentance. They need to recognize that their selfish, quarrelsome behavior is a serious matter indeed."

Notice why we act this way—v. 5. While this verse can be interpreted in several ways, an easy interpretation is that the "spirit" of man, since the fall, has a tendency to be intensely **envious**. In other words, our natural man has a tendency to want what others have even though we are believers. We might envy what others have to such a degree that we will fight, quarrel, become friends with the world, and ultimately commit spiritual adultery to get our desires fulfilled.

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The situation looks hopeless. Is it? No matter how strong our natural tendency is to wander, or how intense our desires battle within us, God has a cure! He has something available to us as believers that is potent enough to meet and to beat any desire.

God gives grace to the humble and opposes the proud.

These are our choices:

- to be proud and opposed by God
- to be humble—i.e., admit our tendency to envy, selfish ambition, coveting, wrong motives, adultery and friendship with the world.

Humility is the requirement! So how do we humbly receive God's grace and turn from our fighting and quarreling? What are the steps to get the individuals of a church back in right standing before God?

1. First step, verse 7a. Submit ourselves to God. Our submission has been to the world—its schemes, its manner of getting things, its pleasures—but now we must submit ourselves again to God.

2. Second step, verse 7b. Resist Satan, so he'll flee from us. All fights within a church and all relational dysfunction are the result of the lack of resistance to Satan in our individual lives. We are so naive. We attack another person in a fight or a quarrel, when Satan is behind it all. We think we are seeking only what we want, but our coveting, quarreling, fighting and pleasure-seeking are fueled by Satan too. We must never forget, Satan should be our target and we must resist him. When we do, he will flee from us! This verse promises that a whole community of believers can resist Satan as well.

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3. **Third step, verse 8a. Come near to God in prayer**, to tell Him that you want to be in close friendship with Him again. You've wandered from Him. You've coveted, and fought, and quarreled. You've not been praying like you should, and when you do, you pray with the wrong motives. You've committed adultery with the world, but now you want to be restored to friendship with Him again. Come near to Him in prayer and He will come near to you. What a prospect!

4. **Fourth step, verse 8b. Repent.** What is required?

- Wash your hands (actions/deeds).
- Purify your hearts (sins, character, desires) because you've been double-minded (unstable, doubting, torn between the world and God).
- Turn from your proud ways!

1. **Fifth step, verse 9. Grieve, mourn, wail.** Godly sorrow will show the intense awareness of our sin; it will express godly grief (2 Cor. 7:10; Joel 2:12); and it will cause us to take our sin seriously and for a period of time, to mourn at what we have done. James is not saying believers should be joyless and not laugh, but at the point of repentance is not the time for it!

2. **Sixth step, verse 10. Humble ourselves.**

In summary, our part is humility before God and others. We are to say "uncle" to the Lord and His ways! If there is fighting to do, let Him do it. Humility will usually end all the fights and quarrels, and He will lift us up! Charles Swindoll makes this comment about humbling ourselves before God:

"If you live your life fighting, you'll end up on the ground, and over a lifetime, you'll end up eating a lot of grass. Wouldn't you prefer surrendering to the One who promises to lift

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you up? Which will it be: a mouthful of grass, or a life full of grace?"

For more insight let's look at another passage:

I Corinthians 1:10-12

"I appeal to you brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. 11] My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. 12] What I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul;' another, 'I follow Apollos;' another, 'I follow Cephas;' still another, 'I follow Christ.'"

The appeal for church unity is made in whose name? In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, anyone causing divisions is fighting against the Lord of the church! They'll never win.

In the ideal church (verse 10) we would all agree with one another, so we had no divisions—perfectly united in mind and thought. This is the goal! Certainly there will be some diversity because of gifts and interests, but we are to be focused unitedly on Jesus Christ and what He desires.

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What were the reasons for the quarrels in the church at Corinth, according to verses 11-12? They were disagreeing about who to follow.

- Who was in charge?
- Who was leading?
- What does that say to us?

This means that when arguments begin to surface in the local church about who is leading and who is following, it is in the same place as the church at Corinth. Let's look at another passage in the book of 1 Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

"Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. 2] I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. 3] You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?

4] For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not mere men? 5] What, after all, is Apollos? and what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6] I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. 7] So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 8] The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. 9] For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building."

What is Paul's evaluation of those in Corinth, according to verse one? They are not spiritual. They are worldly, mere infants in Christ. Does this sound like the church James addressed? (See again James 4:1-10.) The level of spiritual food they can take in is milk, no solid food. They are not ready for meat. One of the reasons for living on milk is that they are unacquainted with the teachings about righteousness. (See Hebrews 5:11-6:3.)

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Paul can tell they are still worldly and infants in Christ because there is jealousy and quarreling and because they are arguing about who they are following. Churches that are fighting, arguing, pouting, yelling, threatening, are revealing their immaturity.

According to verse 5, what one word does Paul use to describe himself and Apollos? *Servants*

. It is the responsibility of the leaders of a given community to lead everyone into service. It seems that one of the problems in the church at Corinth was that it didn't understand the function, calling, and gifting of those who brought its people to Christ. Who assigned Apollos and Paul their tasks—the people of Corinth, or the Lord? (See verse 5c.)

The Lord assigned each task.

The tasks were planting and watering. Paul says he planted and Apollos watered. Who was the One responsible for the growth, and therefore to be praised? (See verses 6-7.) God made it grow. This means a servant of God should not glory in any growth, nor should he be made responsible for it. Paul was not putting down Apollos and himself by these words, but leading the way for the entire congregation, who were all to be servants of one another.

Both the planter and the waterer would be rewarded according to his own labor. They are God's fellow workers; therefore, this is a very close relationship. Each servant listed here has a task and purpose assigned to him, and this passage and the verse following states that these servants will be rewarded and judged according to their labor.

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Who is the ultimate judge of a person's ministry? (See verses 10-15 and 1 Cor. 4:1-5.) A person's motives will be the ultimate criteria for judgment. Remember the battle begins in the heart and therefore must be cured in the heart.

These Scriptures in Corinthians point out that immaturity is the root of the arguments, jealousy and quarreling in Corinth. Paul had to put everything in perspective for the Corinthians, because they weren't able to come to an understanding of their situation by themselves. The answer to their situation was to grow up in the Lord, become united, and learn to respect and honor each person's work. Each servant in the church is to be faithful to his God-assigned task and purpose and look to the Lord to make things grow.