

## **Cravings and Conflict**

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Over the past 15 years three godly men have approached me and asked my permission to marry my three daughters. These men have ventured where angels feared to tread. In approaching me about my daughters—and Carolyn and I are very grateful that God gave them the necessary courage to do so—it was our joy to give them our blessing. We derive great joy from observing how they have cared for and led our daughters and our 12 grandchildren. Along the way, Carolyn and I had the privilege of participating in the premarital counseling for each of these couples. It was our responsibility to interrupt their romantic trance and to prepare them for some of the harsh realities of marriage that awaited them.

James 4:1-2 played a critical role in their preparation for marriage in their preparation for relational conflict in the context of marriage. It has served them well since their wedding day. All three couples have returned and communicated their gratefulness for the difference this passage is made in their marriages. Here's what I discovered over the years: this passage is relevant not simply to those who are engaged to be married or for those who are married.

This passage is relevant to everyone.

It is relevant regardless of age.

It is relevant whether you are male or female.

It is relevant whether you are married or a single parent or a child.

It is relevant because we are all familiar with the harsh reality of relational conflict.

Perhaps you are in the midst of a relational conflict. If so, this passage, when understood and applied, can be a difference-maker in resolving conflict. If you don't presently find yourself in an unresolved relational conflict, well, there is one awaiting you in your future. And I'm not talking about your distant future, I'm talking about your immediate future. Conflict is coming.

Carolyn and I sought to interrupt the romantic trance of our daughters and their future husbands prior to marriage and prepare them for their inevitable relational conflicts. In James 4:1-2, God himself interrupts our romantic view of life and graciously prepares us for conflicts, identifies the root issue in conflicts, and provides life-transforming wisdom for resolving conflict.

In his commentary on the book of Acts, John Stott wrote of the early church, “It wasn’t all romance and righteousness.” No it wasn’t. In our marriages, in our families, in our churches, in our workplaces: it will not be all romance and righteousness. And in this passage what we have is wisdom from above for the resolving of relational conflict. It’s wisdom from above for the promotion of relational harmony, whether it’s in a marriage or family or local church. So let’s discover the wealth of life-transforming grace and wisdom present in this passage.

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.” (James 4:1–2, ESV)

This passage is no flattering portrayal of the early church. Serious relational conflicts existed among the original recipients of this letter. Although they were genuinely converted, there was the distinct presence of relational hostility in their midst and the absence of relational harmony. Just note in verse 1: quarrels (plural); fights (plural). The plurals reveal that these quarrels and fights were not occasional, they were common.

James is addressing a chronic condition in their midst. And notice as well that James does not specify the nature of these conflicts. We could speculate as to the nature of these conflicts after reading the entirety of the letter. But James doesn’t identify the specifics of these conflicts. It is not necessary for him to do because the occasion or the circumstances involved are not of primary importance to James. They are not of primary importance to James because they are not the source or the cause of the quarrels and the fights. That’s good news for us, because regardless of the occasion in our life, for regardless of the circumstances in our lives, what’s taking place in the midst of our quarrels and fights and relational conflict, this passage remains relevant for each of us. James 4:1-2 was written not only for them but it was written for us as well. God was speaking not only to the original readers of this letter but God is kindly and authoritatively addressing us as well. In just a few words, James reveals the root issue of their conflict and provides them with a solution to conflicts. So few words! So much wisdom! So, what do we learn about relational conflict in these two verses?

### **WORSE THAN YOU THINK**

First, we learn that relational conflict is normally worse than you think. It is normally more serious than we think it is, because in general, we have a sinful tendency to

minimize the seriousness of conflict. In particular, I have a sinful tendency to minimize my role and responsibility. We are quite comfortable describing conflict with non-moral or non-objective generalities:

- We are just temperamentally different.
- Our personalities clash.
- We aren't wired the same way.
- We have issues.

Somehow we are satisfied that these are insightful explanations for what is taking place. James won't allow it. James will not allow a superficial assessment of relational conflict. James insists that we examine our quarrels and fights more closely and more carefully. Ultimately he insists that we examine our hearts. James leads us on a theologically-informed examination of our hearts and as we examine our quarrels and fights more closely and carefully, we discover that they are worse than we thought.

Notice in the passage the language of James: what begins as a quarrel at the outset of verse 1 is described as war within at the end of verse 1. What begins as a fight in verse 1 is described as murder and coveting in verse 2. Notice that James' language doesn't soften as the verse progresses. No, it strengthens because the verse begins with human observation of a relational conflict and it proceeds to a divine assessment of a relational conflict.

There is a divine perspective of conflict that is revealed in this passage, because quarrels and fights with each other reveal the presence of sin—not simply against one another but ultimately and most seriously against God himself. James is a wise pastor. He turns our attention away from the quarrels and fights, away from the occasions and the circumstances, and he directs our attention to our hearts.

As we contemplate this divine perspective we realized this while it is worse then we originally thought, there is good news in this discovery. There is very good news here because you will never make progress resolving a quarrel or a fight unless you first recognize the severity of a quarrel.

This is, in effect, theologically-informed instant replay for our hearts. If you watch any football game, no doubt at some point a coach will throw a flag onto the field. He is protesting the call of the official. He is arguing that the official did not get the call right.

Then they go to the replay and watch the play in slow-mo, from every angle. Often at home we realize that the ref on the field did indeed miss the call. Then the referee returns to the field and overturns the original call.

This passage functions that way: it serves as theologically-informed instant replay of our conflict. So as we examine ourselves in light of what is revealed here in James 4, we throw the flag for instant replay on ourselves and where appropriate, return and say to someone we have sinned against: “upon further theological review, I realize what I said to you and how I’ve acted toward you is more serious than I originally thought.”

So, now we know, informed by James, that relational conflict is worse than we think, which helps us to realize we need God’s grace in the form of forgiveness and empowering for change. When we experience relational conflict it can feel complicated and difficult to figure out why this is happening, but James has another surprise in store for us: it is simpler than we think.

### **SIMPLER THAN YOU THINK**

Relational conflict can sure seem complicated. It can certainly feel complicated when you’re in the midst of it. I cherish my bride of more than four decades. We have had a most blessed and romantic four decades of marriage by the grace of God. But we are also familiar with conflicts in the midst of those decades. And there have been times when in our attempts to resolve the conflict we can’t even agree on how the conflict started and it started just 20 minutes ago! And there have a few occasions where as I have presented my perspective of the origin of the conflict that a smile has appeared on Carolyn’s face because what I’m communicating confidently is so confusing its amusing. Conflict can just feel so complicated, appear so mysterious, and seem so confusing.

James is here to help. James provides us with the biblical perspective of relational conflict. James isn’t confused. In James 4:1-2 we discover that relational conflict really isn’t confusing. It is not mysterious. It is not demonic. And its not necessary to remember how it began.

James locates the source of conflict for us in verse 1. “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” There it is, the source or cause: it is within you. Now, so there is no misunderstanding, I’m

assuming you are participating in the conflict. You don't have to participate. You have the option of not participating. I would encourage you to take that option.

But if you have either initiated or you're actively participating then there is wisdom from above in this verse for you. The "cause" of the conflict is not somewhere else. It is not because of someone else. It's within you. That is where we need to begin our examination and evaluation of a conflict where we are participating.

And did you notice that James describes the root issue three times in just two verses?

v1-"Your passions are at war."

v2-"you desire and do not have."

v2-"you covet and cannot obtain."

The source of relational conflict is the sinful cravings within those participating. And applying this can make all the difference when you find yourself in a quarrel, so remember this: remember that most likely it is worse than you think, and secondly discerning the cause is actually simpler than you think because the root issue is not complicated, it's not somewhere else and not in someone else. It is within you.

See, conflicts don't create sin, conflicts reveal sin. And what does conflict normally reveal? Conflicts reveal a certain unsatisfied sinful craving. James wants his readers to discern the cause of their quarrels and fights. The original readers lacked discernment as to the cause of their conflicts. Perhaps you need discernment as to the cause as well. I know I do. What causes quarrels and what causes fights? Sinful cravings within are the cause of quarrels and fights and recognizing that can make an immediate and significant difference in both avoiding conflict and resolving conflict. This can make all the difference.

David Powlison helps us to understand the difference this discernment can make when he writes:

"One of the joys of biblical ministry comes when you are able to turn on the lights in another person's dark room. I have yet to meet a couple locked in hostility (and the accompanying fear, self-pity, hurt and self-righteousness) who really understood and reckoned with their motives. James 4:1-3 teaches that cravings underlie conflicts."

That last phrase is worth memorizing. David's summation of the discernment revealed in this passage is so helpful. **Cravings underlie conflicts.** He goes on:

“Why do you fight? It's not because of my wife or husband. It's because of something about you! And couples who see what rules them (cravings for affection, attention, power, vindication, control, comfort, a hassle-free life) can repent and find God's grace made real to them and then learn how to make peace.”

If you look underneath an unresolved conflict you're going to find a sinful craving. Underneath every conflict is an unsatisfied sinful craving. Its really not complicated. Why do we fight? Here's why: because we don't get what we want. That's why. Nothing complicated about it. Why do we fight? Because we don't get what we want. That is the root issue. There is nothing deeper than this. It is so very kind of the Lord to reveal this to us so that we might give attention to our hearts in the midst of conflict for the purpose of resolving conflict.

Actually, resolving conflict is easier than we think. Yep, you read that right.

### **EASIER THAN YOU THINK**

Let's look at verse 10 and experience the grace present in this verse and promised by this verse:

“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.” James 4:10

In order to really and fully appreciate this verse one must remember the context in which it appears. This chapter began with references to quarrels and fights and coveting and all manner of sinful cravings that do great damage to personal relationships. We are all familiar with this sin and its consequences. And yet in the midst of this sin there appears this verse promising grace.

Verse 10 informs us that grace is greater than our sins! Verse 10 informs us of God's disposition towards those who are in the midst of quarrels and fights. Verse 10 shows us the disposition of a merciful God: he is eager to give us grace in the midst of the cravings and desires that are worse than we initially thought. Hey, verse 10 gives us hope!

And humbling ourselves before the Lord shouldn't prove difficult for us once we've perceived the specific nature of our sins as revealed in verses 1-2. And this is where

resolving relational conflict begins. Always. If we don't first humble ourselves before the Lord, acknowledging our sinful cravings, then there is no way we will be able to resolve a conflict with someone else. No way. Our conflict with God and sin against God must first be resolved before there can be any hope of resolving conflict with someone else.

So, this is where resolving all relational conflict begins: resolving relational conflict with the Lord. How do I do that? How do I humble myself before God? Well, it's easier than you think! We humble ourselves before the Lord by confessing our sins to the Lord, the one we have offended first and foremost. Listen to these familiar words from 1 John:

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9

Confession here implies a genuine conviction of sin and includes a forsaking of sin. But if we sincerely confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Doesn't this appear easy to do? Have you ever wondered, or asked yourself: how can forgiveness possibly be that easy?

When I have offended God by my sin, how can it be this easy to be forgiven by God for my sin? Listen, it can only be this easy because our Savior has done the unimaginably difficult on our behalf. He has resolved the greatest and most serious conflict: the conflict between the holy God and sinners like you and me. He has resolved that more serious conflict through his substitutionary conflict on the cross for our sins. Therefore, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse all our unrighteousness.

And since the most serious conflict has already been addressed by the Savior, there is hope for the resolving of human conflict as a result. But it begins with humbling ourselves before God and asking forgiveness of him where appropriate. And here we discover that grace is greater than our sins. It is amazing.

As we humble ourselves, he exalts us, he forgives us and gives us grace we obviously don't deserve. So humbling ourselves involves first and foremost, acknowledging our sins to God. But it also involves—where appropriate—acknowledging our sins to others and asking their forgiveness. If you have contributed to a conflict, then the means of humbling your self is sincere confession.

Genuine confession is specific. If it is sincere, it will be specific. And if it is sincere it will also be brief. Be suspicious if your confession to someone you've sinned against is lengthy. When mine are lengthy I've learned to be suspicious. Here's why. If it is lengthy, there is a good probability that you are not asking for forgiveness, but instead understanding. You might be in the process of excusing your sin, explaining your sin, requesting understanding of your sin rather than asking forgiveness for your sin. So be suspicious of a lengthy confession. Normally, a genuine confession of sin is evidenced by a sincere, specific, and brief confession of sin.

Resolving relational conflict is easier than you think and only because the Savior has done the unimaginably difficult so that we might humble ourselves before the Lord and receive his forgiveness for our sins and then where necessary ask forgiveness of others.

Sorry to inform you of this but there is a relational conflict awaiting you, and it is not in your distant future. There is certainly the potential for relational conflict in your life this week, even this day. So let's take this wisdom with us into this day. Let the wisdom from above revealed in this passage serve your soul, so that you might receive the grace that is revealed in this passage. So that you might avoid conflict with others by identifying sinful cravings. And if you initiate or participate in conflict, these verses will help you discern the cause of it so that you can humble yourself before God and acknowledge your sin to him and those you have sinned against.

Passages like this protect us sinful cravings and preserve unity in our churches, families, and friendships. Participation in a church, in a family, or in a friendship, are not "all romance and righteousness." Therefore, I am grateful for passages like this and the difference they can make. And I am most grateful for the Savior's sacrifice on the cross for our sins, that we might have hope for the resolving of human conflict.

*This article is based on a sermon preached at [Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville](#) on November 3, 2013, entitled [Cravings and Conflict](#).*

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