

Your Cravings Fuel Your Conflicts (James 4:1-2)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on December 6, 2009

www.goldcountrybaptist.org

When certain types of matter or material bump together, sparks fly. But a fire will never burn unless there is flammable material, there must be fuel for any fire. James 4 wants you to know the fuel for your quarrels and fights is your passionate desires that burn within you – you can't stop outside sparks from flying, they will always fly at times, but you can by God's grace, not give them a place to land and burn in you. Your conflicts are fueled by your cravings.

James 4:1-2 (NASB – note the emphasis on YOU) *What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.*

The conflict James 4 speaks of is not just having a disagreement. You can have different opinions and discuss them in a way that's not sinful. You can disagree without being disagreeable, without sinning. You can correct someone lovingly and confront wrong thinking or wrong living lovingly and even firmly with the goal of honoring Christ and His Word. As parents you can firmly insist but not be enflamed with anger, but James is talking about what burns in us. Why do we explode at others? It only takes a little spark, but that's not the real problem, the problem is explosive material in us.

Ke question: can the nature of my heart be changed so external sparks extinguish on my heart instead of ignite? Yes!

But without James 4:1-2, I would insufficiently diagnose my problem in v. 1: “why am I so upset, why am I quarreling with my wife on this?” My natural answer would be: “it's because of what's in my wife of course! She needs to change and repent!” But v. 1 tells me, “**No, it's because of something inside of you, Phil. You need to change and repent. The problem is inside of you.**” It's true for spouses too, of course, but this text zeroes in on your heart. Yes, other people are sinners but the place God wants you to focus on in current unresolved conflicts or future quarrels is to focus on the battle inside of you, what's going on in the desires of your flesh that have such an effect on what's going on outside of you. We all tend to focus on others and the outward symptoms of our quarrels, but God in this text graciously calls you to focus on the real inward source of fights, sin in you, so that the root (not just the fruit) can be addressed, and so real lasting biblical transformation can begin.

This is not the first time James has made our excuses inexcusable, or called us out on our blame-shifting, buck-passing ways, to remind us that the external occasion or conversation or temptation is never the real or root cause when we sin or even are tempted to.

1:14 *But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust* [or “desire” – same word in James 4:2].

It is these inner desires that spawn sin, giving birth and life to sin, as v. 15 says. These inner cravings are not neutral, they're working to draw us away from what God wants; they're at war in us and are fighting hard to lead astray. Internal battles precede external ones.

1 Pet 2:11 *Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly **lusts** [or desires] which **wage war against the soul.***

In James 4, winning this war within has a 3-fold battle plan:

1. Recognize Your Inner Desires as the Root Problem

James 4:1 asks, what the source is of our quarrels and conflicts? Where do these feuds and fights come from? What is their origin?

The phrase “what’s the source / cause” is emphatic, repeated for both quarrels and fights for further emphasis, as the ESV captures this way: ***What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that **your passions** are at war **within you?*****

NIV: *Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?*

NKJV: *from your desires for pleasure that war in your members*

These “pleasures,” these “desires for pleasure,” these “passions,” as we saw last time, these are desires to please self, coming from the Greek root word we get the word *hedonism* from. Hedonism, pleasure-seeking, wanting to be happy, is at the root of all conflict.

James Boice writes: ‘When we look at this long history of the world’s wars, we recognize that it is a projection of the warfare that is within the human heart. Or to put it another way, it is a projection into history of my desire to have what I (or another) intensely want to have. That is what James is talking about in his analysis. He says, ‘All of these troubles come because in our sin we desire our own pleasure at the expense of other people.’¹

Conflicts, clashing views make sparks, but the fuel is my desire. What enflames, makes the fire grow and burn hot, is internal cravings not external causes.

If your translation has “*in your members*” at the end of v. 1, that’s a NT expression for “in your body,” or “within you.”

Romans 7:23 (NASB95) *but I see a different law **in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.***

The battleground of the heart/mind/soul is where the fight must be fought and won, on the level of thoughts and desires. Paul talked about taking our very thoughts captive and making them obedient to Christ. If we don’t defeat and subdue and keep our desires under control, fleshly desires will defeat us, subdue us, and control us.

Lou Priolo, in the book *The Heart of Anger*, writes: ‘We have angry conflicts with one another because our pleasures (desires which are not necessarily sinful in and of themselves) have become so intense that they are at war within our members. The term to “wage war” is a word that has as its root the idea of being “encamped.” When our desires (as good as they may be) become so strong that they “camp out” in our hearts, those desires (as good as they may be) become sinful ... desires; not because they are sinful desires in themselves, but because they are desired *inordinately*. Our hearts covet them so intensely that we are willing to sin (war and fight) either in order to obtain them or because we are not able to obtain them.’²

This is a critical point in v. 2: *You lust and do not have* – that can be simply translated “you desire” or “you want” and the want or desire isn’t sexual lust or sinful longing necessarily. It’s a word which often refers to a desire for a good thing with no evil or illicit connotation. Jesus used this word to say He *earnestly desired* to eat the Passover with His disciples. Paul used this Greek word of his *godly jealousy* and said the Corinthians should *earnestly seek after* spiritual gifts (2 Cor. 11:2, 1 Cor. 12:31, 14:1, 39). It’s more often used in a good sense. It was a Greek word for strong or passionate desires, and the desire itself can be for a good thing initially.

The problem is not desires in and of themselves, ex:

- husband’s desire for a little relaxation when he comes home
- wife’s desire to have some help around the house or kids behave
- either of their desires for romance or intimacy with the other
- a desire for marriage by those who are single
- a desire for understanding, respect, or even your preferences
- a desire for a particular day or evening to go a particular way

You say, “What, is that such a bad thing?” Not necessarily, but it can be a bad thing, or it can become a bad thing, if that desire is a **BIG** thing, bigger and stronger than your desire to glorify God and serve others. It’s when the thought “it would be nice to have if God would graciously allow today” is replaced with “I must have ... I deserve ... I need ... now ... or else there’s going to be war!” When desires become demands, and things we would like become things we lust after with insatiable craving ... a fight’s coming on.

And when something or someone interrupts or interferes or doesn’t allow us to get that desire, let the war games begin. And when we’re in the battle, our natural flesh assumes the problem is whoever or whatever is keeping us from our desire, but God’s Word turns that upside down and says our desire is the problem.

The problem is not wanting things, we will always want and hope for things, the problem is wanting a thing so bad we sin if we don’t get it (sinful speech or sinful attitudes, complaining, moping, silent treatment, cold shoulder, some sort of punishment or retaliation whether actual or attitudinal, etc.). Whether it’s extreme responses, like the church in Newton, MA, or more everyday responses, like sinful communication patterns among families and friends, every conflict or quarrel can always be traced to frustrated desires.

NIV: ² *You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight ...*

The Puritans used the term “inordinate desire” for our problem, and the surest way you know when a desire has become inordinate is by how you respond if you don’t get it. Do you sin when you don’t get what you want, or do you sin *in order to get* what you want (manipulation, insinuation, intimidation, provocation)?

David Powlison writes in a *Journal of Biblical Counseling* article:

‘James does NOT say, “You are fighting because the other person is [_____]; because your hormones are raging; because a demon of anger took up residence; because humans have an aggression gene hardwired in by our evolutionary history; because your father used to react in the same way; because core needs are not being met; because you woke up on the wrong side of the bed and had a bad day at work.” Instead, James says, you fight because of “your desires that battle within you. You want something but don’t get it.” The biblical analysis is straightforward and cuts to the core. You fight for one reason: because you don’t get what you want. It does “take two to tango.” So why are *you* in the dance? You fight because your desire, what pleases or displeases you, what you long for and crave, is frustrated ... Our cravings rule our lives; they directly compete with God Himself for lordship. No problem is more profound and more pervasive. James 4:1 says that such Godplaying desires “battle” within us ... The metaphor envisions siege warfare, an army digging in around the city. Our desires become entrenched ... hence we fight and wage war. We would act as peacemakers [like in 3:18] if we obeyed the Lord instead of asserting our desires. But where you find quarrels and fights, you are witnessing people obeying the desires of a different lord.’³

1st step in battle plan: Recognize Your Inner Desires (ROOT)

2nd step: Repent of Your Inordinate Desires (REMEDY)

To repent is to turn from self and sin to instead trust Jesus as Lord. If you’re not sure you’ve ever done that or want help in that, I would love to talk with and pray with you. For all of us, repentance should mark all of life. If your desires have become inordinate, more about pleasing self than pleasing Jesus, repent; come to Him for heart-changing grace. Others may have sinned, too, or “started it,” or said something first, but first and foremost this passage wants you to recognize your sin in your part in your response to the conflict, and in your inner desires and cravings that started long before anything recently stirred up your heart hedonism or mine.

Notice again the unmistakable emphasis on YOU in this passage. J. B. Phillips: *‘feuds and struggles that exist among you - where do you suppose they come from? Can't you see that they arise from conflicting passions within yourselves? You crave for something and don't get it, you are jealous and envious of what others have ... and you don't possess it yourselves. Consequently in your exasperated frustration you struggle and fight with one another. You don't get what you want because you don't ask God for it. And when you do ask he doesn't give it to you, for you ask in quite the wrong spirit - you only want to satisfy your own desires. You...’*

Don’t just repent of the fruit, the end result. Confess what’s really going on in your heart, in your desires that have displaced God’s. Verse 6 says God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble, and verses 7-9 explain how the humble repent of sin.

The word for lust/desire in v. 2 comes from 2 Greek words: *epi* (on / upon) and *thumos* (soul / life) – this desire sets the soul upon something. Only spiritual things should be desired that deeply. When we love or long for something in a way that we only should for God, with anything other than God, encamped desires become enthroned desires. God tends to have other plans to remind us He is God and we are not and His kingdom and His righteousness are the only things we should seek first (with pre-eminent importance).

In His grace, God frustrates our desires that have taken the place that only He should have in our hearts. And in His grace He gives us this passage so that next time we have conflict or quarrels, we'll remember that no matter what the circumstance was or what the statement was of another person, God has grace for the root in us.

Counselor Robert Jones writes on this step of resolving conflict:

'repent and seek forgiveness from God and the other person for your contribution to the conflict. This begins with repenting to God of the sinful, ruling desires that caused the conflict ... (James 4:1). Conflicts come from the heart. They arise because I want something (even a legitimate, good item) so badly that I sin to get it. These inordinate desires ... fuel every fight and quarrel we have. I know this is true in my home; the same is also true in yours ...

Jack and Jill's explosive fight illustrates this. Jack comes home and yells at Jill for not keeping the house clean or disciplining the kids better: "All I want is to come home to a peaceful house. Is that too much to ask?"

Jill yells back, then withdraws with bitter mutterings under her breath about Jack being critical and unsupportive of her: "If only I had a husband who accepts me as I am. I need him to love me unconditionally, not attack me all the time!" [But don't just hear what they say, Jones writes] Do you hear the demanding hearts behind their sinful speech? ... Jack craves comfort and tranquility—a peaceful home. Jill craves acceptance and affirmation—unconditional love. While in one sense neither of these is a bad desire, they have become inordinate and controlling. Jack and Jill must repent of the way that getting peace and being loved have captured their hearts [more than Christ]. They must instead live for the Lord and serve each other ...

[As Jesus taught, you must first remove the log in your eye that prevents you to see what's really going on] begin with your planks; that is, *your sinful words and actions that contributed to the conflict.* Even if your offenses may be [in your eyes not as big or even are] objectively less serious than those of your opponent, Jesus calls you to look upon yours as more serious. Yours are planks; his are specks. This issue of perspective, or relative weight, is critical to understanding and applying Jesus' words ...

Instead of dwelling on Harry's sin [in a fight I may have had with him], I must dwell on my own: "I can't believe I spoke that way to Harry. How wicked of me. I was wrong to pierce Harry with my reckless words" (as in Proverbs 12:18). "I have taken the tongue God gave me for praising Him and have used it to curse others instead" (as spoken of in James 3:9-12). I must recognize that God wants me to go to Harry and seek his forgiveness for my ungodly speech ... Consider this penetrating question to help you expose the dynamic. Whose sin bothers you the most— yours or the other person's? God has used this question on more than one occasion to bring me to my senses and to regain His perspective. Your answer will indicate how well you grasp Jesus' log vs. speck rebuke.

... humbly go to the other person to confess your sin and to ask his forgiveness ... Third, seek to love the other person in the way ... and serve the other person.

This begins with cultivating Christlike attitudes (Eph. 4:1-3), including graciously forgiving the person, “just as in Christ God forgave you” (4:32). It involves that attitudinal forgiveness of releasing bitterness from the heart and refusing to usurp God’s role as judge ... if he is repentant, love involves that transacted forgiveness of promising never to bring up that person’s sin again. Love “keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor. 13:5). Further, love means learning to listen and speak to him in godly ways (Prov. 12:18, 18:13), and to serve him in concrete, Christlike ways (Luke 6:27-28; Rom. 12:17- 21). Again, Jesus declares in Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve ...” This Mark 10:45 ministry principle can expose the selfish roots of our conflicts and direct our paths toward concrete solutions.’⁴

1st step in battle plan: Recognize Your Inner Desires (root)

2nd step: Repent of Your Inordinate Desires (remedy then)

3rd step: Re-orient Yourself to God’s Desires (remedy for future)

There’s a little phrase at the end of v. 2 that’s a big part of this process: *You do not have because you do not ask*. Lack of peace is often tied to lack of prayer, whether inner peace (Philippians 4) or outer peace (James 4). We’ll look more at this dynamic next week also in v. 3 which warns of selfish inner motives in prayer, but for now, just notice how critical humble prayer is. The Greek word for *ask* is a request from an inferior to a superior, lowly servant to lord. Ask God submissively, not telling Him you deserve but tell Him you desire it? Don’t look to self, circumstances, or sinful people to meet your wants, cast all your cares on the Lord, He cares for you! Say truly in your heart “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

Pray like Psalm 139: ²³ *Search me, O God, and **know my heart**; Try me and know my anxious thoughts;* ²⁴ *And see if there be any hurtful way **in me**, And **lead me** in the everlasting way.*

Prayer doesn’t change God’s mind to give us what we desire; it should change our hearts to submit to what God desires of us. It corrects my cravings from “my will be done” to “Thy will be done.” It’s not wrong to bring our desires to God, in fact this text suggests the problem is we don’t bring them to God; we try to get our desires ourselves in our way for our kingdom rather than God’s

Jesus brought His desire before His Father in Gethsemane “*If it is possible, let this cup pass from me ... Nevertheless, not as I will but as You will.*” If Jesus prayed that way, His lowly slaves should surely be able to have the humble attitude of James 4:7 “*Submit to God,*” submitting how we would like things to go to God.

Have the attitude of v. 15, not that it’s wrong to have desires for things to go a certain way, but to say “*If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.*” Our desires should be open-handed and upward looking in prayer rather than close-fisted demands glaring at others who don’t give us what we think we must have. *Ask God!* Bring all your wants and desires to God in prayer and look to His hand for what you truly need rather than trying to take matters into your own hand autonomously and arrogantly. God is sovereign and in control over how things go in your day; why not speak to Him reverently about your desires rather than speaking rashly to others who aren’t in control and who can never love you as much as God does. Lack of peace is often from lack of prayer. I need to pray more and be more submissively accepting of what God desires.

I need to trust Him for whichever of my little desires He does or does not grant in His wise and sovereign goodness. If we have a prayerful God-focused perspective on our wants that we hold loosely and are thankful for any desire fulfilled (rather than demanding or thinking we deserve) our lives will be filled with far less strife and far more delight in our truly satisfying God.

1 James M. Boice. *An Exposition of James, by Boice (Sure I Believe, So What!)*, p. 86.

2 Lou Priolo (1997). *The Heart of Anger : Practical Help for the Prevention and Cure of Anger in Children*. Amityville, NY (P.O. Box 805, Amityville, NY 11701): Calvary Press Publishing, p. 105.

3 David Powlison, "Getting to the Heart of Anger, Part 3," *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Volume 16/1 (Fall 1997), p. 34-35.

4 Robert Jones, "Resolving Conflicts Christ's Way," *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Volume 19/1 (Fall 2000), p. 16-17