

James: sermon #8
War: its source and cure
(James 4:1-12)

Introduction

“Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness,” says James (3:18). In this we hear echoes of Jesus’ words: **“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God”** (Mat. 5:9). **Sadly, humans often make war, not peace—they are argumentative, abusive and combative.** This happens at the national level and also at the personal level. But at either level, what is the source of war? And what is its cure? **Let’s listen to the Holy Spirit speaking through James as he identifies three kinds of warfare and prescribes their cure.**

1. War with other people (4:1a, 11–12)

James 4:1 What causes fights and quarrels among you?

Wait a second! Is James here talking about **fights** (‘wars’ in the KJV) and **quarrels between Christians**? Sadly, yes. The ***you*** in this verse is plural and refers to believers. And, sadly, some are at ‘war’ among themselves. Jesus’ first disciples quarreled about who was the greatest (Luke 9:46–48). Christians in Corinth competed in public meetings, and sued each other in court (1 Cor. 6:1–8; 14:23–40). Galatian believers were “biting and devouring” each other (Gal. 5:15). And in the church at Philippi two leading women could not get along (Phil. 4:1–3). James has an admonition for such folks:

11 Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. 12 There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you--who are you to judge your neighbor?

Slanderous, quarrelsome behavior is contrary to the “law that gives freedom” (1:25; 2:12)—the “royal law” of love; specifically here, love for neighbor (2:8). A neighbor (a fellow brother in Christ in this case) is being abused verbally—this is another example of the gross misuse of the tongue. Speaking evil of a brother in Christ and judging them with unkind motives is to break the law of love, sinning against them and against God. We are not called to judge people; God is judge. However, this does not mean we are forbidden to evaluate the behavior of others. For this we need discernment (Phil. 1:9–10), and we must not act like God by passing judgment. We may judge as in discern and evaluate but we cannot condemn. We first examine our own lives, and then we try to help others (Matt. 7:1–5). And we always remember that we never know all the facts in a case, and we certainly never know the motives that are at work in people’s hearts. So we are circumspect; cautious, careful and loving. We avoid war with other people. We seek peace and pursue it.

But where does this warfare against others come from? James answers by addressing a second kind of war...

2. War within ourselves (4:1-3)

1 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.

The war in the heart fuels all war—including that in the church! “But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth...For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice (3:14, 16).

James' point is that selfishness is at the heart of all sin. Eve disobeyed God because she wanted to eat of the tree and become wise like God. Abraham lied about his wife because he selfishly wanted to save his own skin (Gen. 12:10–20). Achan caused defeat to Israel because he selfishly took some forbidden loot from the ruins of Jericho (Josh. 7). “Each of us has turned to his own way” (Isa. 53:6).

Often we veil our religious quarrels under the disguise of “spirituality.” We're like Miriam and Aaron who complained about Moses' wife, but in reality they were envious of Moses' authority (Num. 12). Or we imitate James and John who asked for special thrones in the kingdom, when what they really wanted was recognition right now (Mark 10:35–45). In both instances, the result of selfish desire was chastening and division among God's people.

Selfish desires lead to *wrong actions*: “You kill and covet...you quarrel and fight” (James 4:2). People who are at war with themselves because **they deny** their own selfish desires are unhappy people. They never enjoy life. Instead of being thankful for the blessings **they have**, they complain about the blessings **they don't have**. They cannot get along with other people because they envy them for what they have and what they can do. They are always looking for that “magic something” that will change their lives, when the real problem is within their own hearts.

Selfish desires also lead to *wrong praying*: “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (4:3). Instead of seeking God's will, we tell God in prayer what he is supposed to do; and get angry at him if he does not obey us. And so war within ourselves spills over into a third kind of war...

3. War with God (4:4–7)

Ultimately, all war is rooted in rebellion against God. Before the fall of humankind, there was perfect harmony; but sin entered, and conflict resulted. **Including conflict**

with God. Sadly, believers sometimes succumb to this conflict. How? **By cozying up to God's enemies.** James names three: **the world's system, our wrong fleshly desires and the devil.**

a. The world's system (v. 4)

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.

By the “world,” James means human society apart from God. **The “system” of this world is fundamentally anti-God.** Abraham was God's “friend” (James 2:23); Lot was the friend of the world (Gen. 14). Who won and who lost in that choice? Who will we be like?

Typically, a Christian gets caught up with the world's evil *gradually*. First, there is “**friendship with the world**” (James 4:4). This results in being “**polluted**” by the world (1:27). This, in turn, leads to **loving the world** (1 John 2:15–17), making it easy to “**conform**” to the world's patterns of thinking and living (Rom. 12:2). The sad result is being “condemned with the world” (1 Cor. 11:32), our souls saved “but only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Cor. 3:11–15). Friendship with the world has consequences.

James compares this friendship with the world to adultery (“you adulterous people”). **Believers are “married to Christ” (Rom. 7:4) and called to be faithful to him.** The Jewish Christians who read this letter would understand this picture of “spiritual adultery” because the Prophets Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Hosea used it when rebuking Judah for her sins (Jer. 3:1–5; Ezek. 23; Hosea 1–2). And so **the world's sinful system is God's enemy.** And there is a second enemy as well...

b. Fleshly desires (vv. 1, 5)

1 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?...5 Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?

“Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? (James 4:1, NRSV). To have desires is not wrong—in fact, God has placed healthy desires within us through the “spirit he caused to live in us.” Sadly this human spirit (which is apparently the spirit in view here), has been corrupted by sin and therefore our natural spirit's desires have become sinful rather than healthy—and a primary manifestation of corrupt desires for James is envy—indeed, **our fallen human nature “envies intensely.”** And so the battle with God rages, for as Paul says, “The sinful nature [our corrupted human spirit] **desires what is contrary** to the Spirit and the **Spirit what is contrary** to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other” (Gal. 5:17). For James this conflict is the “battle within you” (4:1) as our fleshly desires grieve the Spirit of God who lives in us.

Living to please the old nature means declaring war against God. “The sinful [carnal] mind is hostile to God” (Rom. 8:7). To allow the fleshly nature to control our minds and hearts is to turn away from the blessing of vibrant fellowship with God. Abraham had a **spiritual mind**; he walked with God and enjoyed peace as God’s friend. Lot had a **carnal mind**; he disobeyed God and experienced war. “The mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace” (Rom. 8:6, NIV margin).

And so the world’s system and fleshly desires are enemies of God. And there is a third enemy as well...

c. The devil (vv. 6–7)

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.

Pride is Satan’s great sin, and it is one of his chief weapons against us: **God wants us to be humble; Satan wants us to be proud.** “You will be like God,” Satan promised Eve (Gen. 3:5), and she believed him. **God wants us to depend on him** (“he gives more grace”), while **the devil wants us to depend on ourselves.** Satan is the author of all “do-it-yourself” spiritual enterprises including all forms of religious legalism and religious deceptions. He enjoys fomenting pride within believers, encouraging them to do it on their own, rather than relying entirely on God’s grace. In spite of Jesus’ warnings about Satan’s plans, Peter fell into this snare, pulled out his sword, and took matters into his own hands. But of ourselves (apart from God, and under the sway of the devil) there lives in us no good thing (Rom. 7:18); but when we trust Christ, we come alive to the good thing—the love and life of God that we share through Christ Jesus.

Summary: Here, then, are **three enemies** that want to turn us away from God: the **world’s system, our fleshly desires, and the devil.** These are vestiges of our old life of sin (Eph. 2:1–3). Christ delivered us from these, but they still have a lingering impact. How can we overcome their downward pull into warfare? **James gives us three admonitions.**

4. Three Admonitions to Overcome War (4:7–10)

a. Submit to God (v. 7)

7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

“Submit” is a military term meaning surrender. **Surrender to God is the pathway to cessation of the warfare within ourselves, with other people, and with God.** Because immature Christians continue in self-reliant; self-protective mindsets they continue to experience these battles. They need to totally surrender—to return to full

allegiance to God. As they do, inner and outer turmoil (their ‘demons’) will flee. They will begin to experience more fully the “peace that passes understanding.”

Illustration: After King David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and killed her husband, he hid his sins for almost a year. **There was war between him and God, and David had declared it.** Read Psalms 32 and 51 to discover the high price David paid to be at war with God. **When he finally submitted to God, David experienced peace and joy.** This too he recorded in Psalms 32 and 51. **Submission is an act of the will; it is saying, “Lord, not my will but yours be done.”**

b. Come near to God (v. 8)

8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

How do we do this? **By changing our behavior (washing our ‘hands’) and by confessing our sins (purifying our “hearts”).** The Greek word translated *purify* means “make chaste.” This parallels the idea of “spiritual adultery” in James 4:4. **God graciously expresses and affirms his nearness to us when we deal with the behaviors and thoughts that keep us from enjoying his presence.** By doing so, we acknowledge that we have one Lord—we stop having a dual allegiance—**“double-mindedness.”** **God seeks the whole person, all that we are. Let us open all of our lives—actions and thoughts to his Lordship.**

c. Humble yourselves before God (vv. 9–10)

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.

This is James’ call for **believers to repent.** They must be **careful to avoid superficial repentance**—an **outward show** of submission, but no **inward surrender** to God. **God hates such expressions of hypocrisy and human pride** (Prov. 6:16–17), and will chasten the proud. We have a tendency to treat sin lightly, even to laugh about it (“change your laughter to mourning”). But **sin has devastating consequences; and one mark of true humility is facing the seriousness of our sin and turning from it in the brokenness of deep repentance.** As we do, **God will lift us up!** This is the testimony of Scripture: **“A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps. 51:17).** **“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18).** As Jesus said, **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3)** and **“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:14).**

Conclusion

The battles that rage between people (sadly, sometimes among Christians) come ultimately from war within and war with God. All such warfare is of

the devil—grounded in his worldly, demonic wisdom; not in God’s wisdom. We can not have it both ways. We are either friends of the world (and we’ll experience warfare as the result) or friends of God (and we’ll experience peace as the result). Let us choose. Let us repent. Let us embrace fully God’s way, the way of Jesus; the way of peace. May we be instruments of Jesus and his peace. May we be used of him to turn the swords of war into the plowshares of righteousness and peace!

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