

# Sermon Series: Wisdom that Works

## #8 Curing Conflict James 4:1-12

When you set out to attend a **church** meeting, **do you expect to find** on your arrival a **peaceful and harmonious** environment? Or do you enter **with caution**, expecting that there may **be conflict, tension and dispute**?

**Tim Dyer** lives in Tasmania, but he travels widely as a **conflict consultant** to businesses and churches across Australia and south-east Asia. **I like to think of Tim as The Dispute Doctor.** For the last 25 years he has helped to **broker peaceful outcomes** for people who are at each other's throats.

Tim says, from his extensive experience of consulting with churches in conflict, "Christian congregations are **more prone to conflict** than any other group." Is he overstating the case? Are Christian churches really **cauldrons of conflict**? And if so, do the Scriptures offer **advice on how to make peace, not war in churches**?

**James chapter 4** does just that. Let's unpack James' message in **two parts**. Firstly, **in vss. 1-6** we read

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

### 1. Diagnose the root cause (vss. 1-6)

**James was no stranger to brokering peace where** conflict arose in the Church.<sup>1</sup> Like an early church **dispute doctor**, James has already taught in this letter that if **God's wisdom** is the source of our actions, we should see as a result **kind words, a humble attitude**, and consistent **acts of mercy** in the church.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Acts chapter 15 where James was speaking during a major theological and pastoral dispute over inclusion of those who weren't Jews into full membership of the Church.

But in some of the churches James wrote to there were **fight**s and **quarrels** both verbal and violent.<sup>2</sup> Rather than pointing to particulars<sup>3</sup> of their arguments, James is keen to **diagnose the root cause of conflict**. What is it? We can find the answer in the various unflattering ways James describes his readers:

Vs. 1	“hedonists”	James uses a Greek word from which we get our English word “ <b>hedonism</b> ”. Humans have a penchant for personal <b>pleasure</b> , a stomach for <b>self-aggrandizement</b> , and an insatiable <b>desire to acquire</b> . The core of conflict lies deep within the “heart”. <sup>4</sup>
Vs. 2	“murderers”	James likens the verbally violent to “ <b>murderers</b> ”. Jesus too made the link between <b>anger</b> in one’s heart towards others and the crime of <b>killing</b> . <sup>5</sup>
Vs. 4	“adulterers”	James likens divisive ones to “ <b>adulterers</b> ”. Like ancient Israel, described by prophets as <b>unfaithful</b> to God, as proved by their unjust treatment of others. <sup>6</sup>
Vs. 4	“friends of the world”	James also calls violent verbalists “ <b>friends of the world</b> ”, not friends of God. He’s not recommending withdrawal from normal life or a monastic vocation, but noting that his readers look happily at home with the worst of what humans do to each other.

In the early 1900’s a question was raised in *The Times* newspaper in London. It read, “**What is wrong with the world?**” One writer sent in the following response: “**Dear Sir, I am**” yours faithfully, G.K. Chesterton.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>2</sup> Suited to describing disputes both verbal and violent in either households or nations alike

<sup>3</sup> Absentee landlords referred to in chapter 5 generated anger and lashing out

<sup>4</sup> The Bible often speaks of sin in terms of covetousness. In chapter 1 James says God is giver of what truly satisfies, but people seek what their eyes see and what their selfish hearts want.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 5:20-22

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Jeremiah 23:10

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert Keith Chesterton was an English writer, philosopher, lay theologian, and literary and art critic. Modern audiences may know him as the author of Father Brown, but he was famous for his theological insights and social commentary and wit.

How many of us would be so insightfully honest? Do we have the wisdom to see ourselves as **contributors to conflicts**?

I remember having to confront a church member many years ago because they would not refrain from **sending hurtful, threatening, and divisive emails** to other church members at all hours, day or night. I realized after talking with the man that such behaviour was **perfectly normal and acceptable** in his day-to-day workplace. He had **not considered** that such actions might be unfit and harmful in his church community.<sup>8</sup>

No wonder James had to spend **so much time** in this letter teaching about the **power of the tongue** – the potential of speech or written word - to divide, deride and destroy. Now wonder he had to make such a strong appeal to a different wisdom than that which his readers brought into the church from the “normal” practices of their “world”.<sup>9</sup>

**James’ diagnosis** of the root cause of conflict reminds us of Jesus’ wisdom. He taught that destructive, self-seeking words and actions originate in the “**heart**” of a person<sup>10</sup> - the very **centre of one’s “self”**. His death on the cross, the Scriptures teach, is the means of **cleansing** and **healing** this fundamental “disease” common in some degree to all people.<sup>11</sup>

In the **second part** of our passage for study, James moves **from diagnosis to dispensing medicine**. To **produce a peaceable church**, James says, God’s “wisdom” must be allowed to do its work.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Dispense the right medicine (vss. 7-12)

In **verses 7-12** we read...

<sup>7</sup> Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves before the

---

<sup>8</sup> Though I regarded them as unfit, full stop!

<sup>9</sup> The Apostles don’t teach that its essential to withdraw from all contact with the world around them on becoming Christians. The word “world” is used to describe negative and ungodly self-centred ways.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Matthew 15:19

<sup>11</sup> See verses James 4:5-6, 8 and note 1 John 1:7 as a summary

<sup>12</sup> James gives a mini sermon in vss. 5-6 based on Prov. 3:34.

Lord, and he will exalt you. <sup>11</sup> Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. <sup>12</sup> There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbour?

A young man once visited the great 16<sup>th</sup> Century German preacher Martin Luther to ask for his advice. He said that he was constantly plagued by **wrongful desires** and **lustful thoughts** and did not know **what to do**.<sup>13</sup> **Martin Luther's reply was typically blunt** and to the point. He said,

“You can't stop birds flying to and fro in the air, but you can stop the birds from nesting in your hair!”



Of course, Luther was pointing out to the young man that there will inevitably be temptations and desires that will arise that might lead us to sin. But, he suggested, there is something we can do about our responses to those desires that might lead to harming others and causing divisions.

So too, James teaches that Christ offers, **not a one-off cure** that stops temptations and desires that lead to conflict,<sup>14</sup> but the means to **respond wisely** when they inevitably arise. Instead of two jabs of a **vaccine** to guard against conflict, the grace of God in Christ offers us the power to keeping walking the **pathways toward peace** instead of corridors leading to conflict.<sup>15</sup>

**The key ingredients** of James' recommended therapy are summarized by me here in **these four R's**:

- **Relinquish your need for power** over others and over God (7a,10),
- **Reject destructive patterns** that cause strife (7b,8b)

---

<sup>13</sup> Each of us must have lost count of the number of times we have been in full agreement with St. Paul who wrote, “I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do.” “No, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing” (Romans 7: 18-19).

<sup>14</sup> Experts in conflict polarity theory today, like my friend Tim, tell us that community conflicts are often never completely solvable, but can be wisely managed to be peaceable and productive.

<sup>15</sup> Interesting to note from Tim Dyer that conflict consultants have shifted in the last 2 decades from curing conflict to managing conflicts wisely and seeing them as a polarity, not problem to be solved.

- **Reflect deeply** on the benefits of knowing Christ (9), and
- **Refrain** from slander and judgment (11,12).

Lest we think these remedial actions above are within our natural abilities to apply consistently, we must recall that James urges his readers to ask God for wisdom needed for peace.<sup>16</sup> James says in 4:7-8 that God is **ready at hand to give what we need** for peace to be possible.<sup>17</sup>

I was fascinated to listen to Olympic canoeist **Jess Fox** speak of her recent **gold medal win**. She repeatedly told reporters how the incredible support and work of **her team** led to victory. None of them were in the canoe with her during the race, yet she **felt them close at hand**. That's how James wants us to think of God as we live our lives: near to us, just as Jesus said the Holy Spirit would be with people of faith.<sup>18</sup>



Resisting temptation that leads to conflict and harm to others **can be difficult to develop as a habit**. But, as Augustine of Hippo once wisely put it,

“God gives what God demands (of us)”.



James would have us seek God's help to **remove any obstacles** to God's grace. His instructions in verses 7 - 12 are all **ongoing imperatives**, not one-time fixes. They should become part of our **regular practice** of following Jesus.

James was confident of Jesus' victory over sin on the cross. Through Him **evil is ultimately defeated**<sup>19</sup>, so, says James, it need not be allowed to have the upper hand in our lives and our churches. He tells us in verses 5 and 6 that God's grace abounds “more and more”, and God “jealously desires”<sup>20</sup> to produce in us a humility that is not something we can create through our own efforts; a humility perfected in Jesus Himself.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> James 1:5

<sup>17</sup> Vs. 8

<sup>18</sup> John 14:16

<sup>19</sup> The apostles, like many ancient ones, personified evil and saw Jesus' victory over sin as the defeat of God's great adversary, e.g. 1 John 3:8

<sup>20</sup> A positive, in the sense that God zealously seeks to put a spirit of humility in us, vss. 5-6

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Philippians 2:3-11, Hebrews 12:1-2

We now have a **diagnosis** of church conflict and James' recommended prescription, and therapy God is ready at hand to **dispense**. At the beginning of today's sermon, I asked you a question. When you attend a church event, **do you expect a peaceful environment?** James would ask you, as you set out for such a gathering, to be **the maker of that peace** you are hoping to find.

With God's help, James would recommend that you and I should...

- lay aside our want to rule over others,
- put off the need for increasing your own pleasure at the expense of others,
- more deeply appreciate the benefits of knowing Christ as the true satisfier in life, and
- be that one who encourages, blesses, and promotes peace in community.