

The Source of Discord

Scripture Text: James 4:1–10

Introduction

What distinguishes us as disciples of Jesus Christ? Is it our relationship with God? Is it our prayer life? Is it our devotion to the Bible? Is it our service to one another? Is it our love for Him or our love for each other? All of these things are characteristics of those who follow Jesus Christ. Of course, the last one, our love for Christ and His Church, should motivate everything we do as disciples. In fact, Jesus said that our love for one another is how people will know that we are His disciples (John 13:34-35). Disciples of Christ should be the most loving people in the world. We are a part of the family of God, but even families do not act lovingly all the time. Even people who genuinely love one another will fight with one another. Just ask any married couple. They may love one another and may be committed to one another, but they will also fight with one another. The same thing is unfortunately true for the Church. We need to be a people who *live out the gospel of Jesus Christ*, who are so changed by the blood of Christ that it shows. Living out the gospel can be difficult, though, particularly when we want to follow our own selfish desires. We come up with all sorts of reasons for *not* loving one another:

*I know I should forgive him/her for what he/she did to me, but it hurts too much.
I know I should call or visit my church family, but I am too busy.
I know I should share what God has given me, but it is mine; I want it for myself.*

What we really mean by saying those things is “I hear what you are saying, God, but I think my way is better.” We often know what we should do, but we just *do not want to do it*. What we want to do gets in the way of what God desires to do. Our own selfish desire overrides any attempt to do what is right. When we think we know better than God, or we think what God has said is wrong, it shows that we are not *really* following Christ, but rather ourselves. Being disciples of Christ means that we not only love one another, but that we also faithfully follow Jesus. James dealt with this issue by describing two types of friendship: *one with the world* and *the other with God*. He dealt with the issue of what causes discord in a church. He answered the question about what causes brothers and sisters in the family of God to hide the gospel of Jesus Christ from each other and to treat one another *without* love and compassion. For that, let us now turn to James.

Selfish Desires Lead to Big Problems

What causes discord among people? Put simply, it is sin. It is our selfish, sinful desires. These desires can cause all sorts of problems. James mentioned a couple of things earlier in this letter about problems in a church. He wrote that jealousy and selfish ambition among God’s people can cause all sorts of trouble in the church. For instance, selfish ambition is a willingness to split a group of people in order to achieve some personal desire. It is the desire to have things a certain way, no matter what scripture says or how it hurts others. The same word is translated “rivalry” in other passages of scripture (Galatians 5:20; Philippians 1:17; 2:3). James described this worldly behavior

in terms that progress from bad to worse. Envy and selfish ambition is first earthly, then unspiritual, and finally demonic. Does that sound like something we want to have? Does that sound like something that should characterize a disciple of Jesus Christ? No, it does not. So, let us look at what causes discord in the the Body of Christ.

James 4:1–3 ¹ *What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?* ² *You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.* ³ *You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*

James used the word “passions”, which could literally be pleasures. What James was saying is that what you want to do conflicts with what someone else wants to do. James called it a war within us. This sounds similar to something Paul wrote. Paul referred to a battle raging within us where we want to do what is right but because of our sin, we keep doing what is wrong (Romans 7:18-22). Here, James mentioned that our selfish desires are battling within us, they are at war within us, and they motivate us to fight for what we do not have. Self-centered desires cause people to make war against each other in a church. James even used extremely violent language for dissension, calling it murder. Some think this should be taken literally of people killing each other; however, it may be best to view this as a metaphor for the devastating effect of unrestrained selfish desire. When our selfish desires go unchecked, it can cause all sorts of problems, killing the unity of a church and destroying our relationships. We want something that we do not have and so we fight for it. We covet something and then we tell ourselves that we are right to want it, and this leads to trouble for the whole group. This reminds me of the tenth commandment. Did not God tell us to not covet (Exodus 20:17)?

We do not have, because we do not ask. This is a reminder that we should ask God for what we seek rather than fighting each other for it. Being unfaithful in prayer results in a failure to receive many of God’s blessings. Not all prayers are pleasing to God, though. Sometimes, when we do ask for something, it is with the wrong motives. We should have prayers that are *consistent with His will* as revealed in scripture. Rather than seeking to honor God and advance His kingdom purposes, some prayers seek only to satisfy our own self-centered desires. The need of asking God for His provision requires knowledge of our true need. That is where we go wrong sometimes: we do not know our true need. We think we know. We think our own desire is the true need, but oftentimes, it is not. As such, prayer becomes evil because of what is prayed for and why. Ask yourself this, “What do I mostly pray? How do I mostly pray?” Are your prayers mostly for you to receive something? Are they to please God? This leads to the next point.

The Wrong Allegiance Brings Trouble

Where does your allegiance lie? For many, this question most likely evokes a patriotic pride. You may think of saying the Pledge of Allegiance, or showing your support for your country or military. If I asked you where your *ultimate* allegiance is, meaning, who or what do you truly serve, many of you would most likely say God or Jesus. But, if you

look at what really motivates you, what you are really passionate about, what you spend more time desiring or discussing, would it be Jesus Christ? For instance, if you look at what you post on Facebook, what would it say about your desires? Oftentimes, there is more allegiance to a college football team, or to a political candidate or party, or to the United States of America, than there is to King Jesus or His Church. I understand we live in this world and we rightly care about it, but do you care more for earthly things than godly things? Are you more friendly to the things and people of this world than you are to Jesus? James described this as committing adultery. Look at the next verses.

James 4:4–5 ⁴ *You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.* ⁵ *Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”?*

It is interesting that James used the words “adulterous people” in verse four. Have you ever thought of yourself as committing adultery on God? To be unfaithful to God is to commit adultery on Him. To court the world and the things of this world while following God is to commit adultery against our Lord Jesus Christ, the Husband of the Church. This should remind us of God’s relation to Israel in the Old Testament, that was depicted as a marriage. Israel was the wife of God (Isaiah 54:4–8), and God considered her idolatries, going after other gods and other *desires*, as adulteries (Hosea 3:1; Ezekiel 23:45). They were unfaithful lovers. Likewise, God created us for Himself. He did not create us for ourselves so that we could live to fulfill our own selfish desires and our own selfish passions. God is jealous over us. He will not share us with anyone or anything. Any muddling of our relationship with God is unfaithfulness to Him. Thus, James wrote that *spiritual adultery* means that we are being an enemy of God. Instead of being faithfully wedded to our Lord, we, by our evil, selfish ways, flirt with the Devil, turn our back on God, and have an affair with the world. We are being allies of Satan!

The truth is that we live in this world, but we are not permanent residents here. We are traveling through this world to our home in heaven to be with our Husband, Jesus. We are not to be like the world, but we are to be like Jesus. People who are unfaithful to God have chosen friendship with the world by imitating worldly ways of thinking and worldly activities, making them enemies of God. As disciples of Christ, however, we are to be witnesses for Jesus in this world. We are to let the light of the gospel shine brightly in this dark world, and it starts within the household of faith, the Church. If we fail to show the light here, if we fail to love one another here, how will we do it in the world? James wrote that if you follow your selfish desires and sow discord among the family of God, then you are an enemy of God. Our natural inclination, especially when unguarded from the temptations of the world, is to follow our selfish desires. They will dominate your relationships and inflame all sorts of quarrels and conflicts among others. Evil desire is a reality with every one of us and it must be confronted. It is also evidence of our conflict with God. So, now we turn to how we ought to confront these desires.

Submit, Draw Near and Repent

What we have seen thus far is that when our selfish desires are not kept in check, the worst of them blaze out of control and usher in the worst conflicts of coveting and envy. These worldly desires, these “desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:17-21), bring discord among the family of God and actually demonstrate our own conflict with God. Strangely enough, James did not call for resolving conflict with other people by telling us to go to others and fix the problem. That is not to say that we should not do that. But, we must first go to the source of the problem. It does little good to address the symptom of a sickness without going to the root of the problem. James uncovered the the real conflict in the Church is our relationship with God Himself. To fix discord within the Church, we must first start with fixing our relationship with God. Look at the next few verses.

James 4:6–7 ⁶ *But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”* ⁷ *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

There it is again, humility. We must be a humble people. If we are to have a relationship with God, we must be humble. God opposes the proud, but He shows favor to those who humble themselves. For God to oppose the proud means He resists and sends judgment, for the proud have chosen the praise and the ways of the world and are acting as enemies of God. Pride stirs up the desires of all those who have succumbed to various temptations of the heart. Pride leads to boasting. The sin of pride not only tends to boast in what it has and in its own life, but even boasts in what it does not have and takes credit for someone else’s accomplishments. Humility also applies to our relationships with one another. It is harder to fight with people when you are humble to one another. I did not say it is impossible, but it is harder. When we take a back seat, when we put our pride away, and when we consider others more important than ourselves (Philippians 2:3-4), we will be more able to be at peace with others.

What else does this passage say? It also tells us to resist the Devil. Satan is the embodiment of all that resists God and is at enmity with God. Wherever envy and selfish ambition are present in the conflicts and quarrels of the Body of Christ, the Devil is there. Many people remember the resisting the Devil part in this passage, and we should. We have the promise that Satan will flee from us if we resist Him. But resisting Satan is not the focus here. We can try to resist the Devil all day long and fail if we do not do something else. The only way to resist the Devil is by first submitting and drawing near to God. What James was saying was that conflict with one another is a symptom of our own conflict with God. All conflict resolution should begin by a renewed submission to God. We must humble ourselves and submit ourselves to God. We must surrender ourselves to Him. Satan will be defeated and will have to flee, as he did from Christ (Luke 4:13). This requires a drawing nearer to God. Look at the next verses.

James 4:8–10 ⁸ *Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.* ⁹ *Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.* ¹⁰ *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.*

Here is evidence of the real problem. When there is discord among the people of God, there is a separation from the presence of God. That is not to say that God is not with us, but we have moved away from Him and His will. Therefore, we must draw near to God. Think of a priest coming into the presence of God in the tabernacle. What James meant by drawing near to God is like the approach of the priest to God in His temple for worship and sacrifice. Godly people approach God to perform their spiritual service. Believers come near to God by focusing attention on Him in devout prayer in the knowledge of God and His promises to be with them. The believer goes to God in prayer ready to hear the will of God and made ready to go away from the encounter to serve Him. The closer you draw to God, the more you read the Bible and the more you pray, the closer you will be to Him. Have you noticed that the closer you are to God, the closer you will be with one another? This does not mean that if you do these things that you will never encounter conflict. Until Jesus comes to take us home, we will always be influenced by sin. But, the more time you spend with Him, the better equipped you will be to resist the Devil and to respond to people in love.

But wait, as the commercial often says, there is more. We must also repent of our sin. We must acknowledge our waywardness, our selfish desires, and our flirting with the enemy, in order to make things right with God. Repentance has a cleansing effect on our souls. One might think that this must precede our approach to God, but this is not the case. God has already implanted His Word within His people. Cleansing ourselves is allowing God to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. When we turn away from God to follow our selfish desires, we must turn back to Him, draw close to Him, and repent of our wrongdoing. Honesty and confession of sin is necessary if the situation of evil desires is at all to be corrected. The fact that James mentioned laughter shows how casually his readers were treating their sin. The only proper reaction to our selfish desires is to mourn and weep over it. This is not an outward show of remorse. This is a true grieving over one's sorry state of a faith that is in contradiction to God and His Word. True repentance will evoke sorrow and grief. Therefore, humble yourself, submit to God, and repent of your sin, and God will exalt you. That is how to resolve discord.

Conclusion

In closing, ask yourself, "Am I causing discord or discontent with others?" If so, what do you need to do about it? First, you need to get your relationship with God right. You need to repent of your selfish desires, your sin, and draw near to Him. You need to exercise the faith you have with prayer that seeks His will and not your own will. Without active faith, making prayerful requests for wisdom from God, drawing closer to Him, seeking His help and His power to resist the Devil, you will be at the mercy of your most selfish desires. Your selfish desires will cause all sorts of problems for you and for others. Once you get your relationship right with God, then ask yourself, "Who do I need to go to right now to make things right?" Is there someone you have hurt? Is there someone you are not loving? Take that next step. Humble yourself before God and others, submit to God, and show His love to others. That is how you can resolve discord. Thanks be to God. Amen!