

Hedonism Brings Conflict

James 4:1-3

¹ *What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is it not your pleasures which wage war among your members?* ² *You lust and do not have, so you commit murder. And you are envious 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 with wrong motives so that you may spend it on your pleasures.*

Getting into Trouble

College registration. Form after boring form. Suddenly a question caught my interest: *What is your religious affiliation?* I wrote my answer quickly: *Pragmatic Hedonism*. At seventeen I styled myself as not only wise but practical; the lure of pleasures went without saying, but I also wanted to stay out of trouble. Were James standing by my side he would have told me that I couldn't pull it off. A hedonistic approach to pleasure always gets us into trouble. Serious trouble.

When James says "pleasure," he uses a word that reeks with selfishness. He's addressing people who demand their own pleasure, have a sense of entitlement, and become angry when their expectations are not met. James is talking about hedonism. And hedonism brings conflict.

Our hedonistic attempts to replace God ignore the fact that pleasure is God's gift ... not our acquisition. God loves to pleasure us; we (mistrusting His ability or His intent) try to arrange pleasure on our own. Our attempts to replace God's efforts with our own efforts shut Him out of our lives, rob us of His gifts, and break His heart. We've misunderstood Him: *God isn't anti-pleasure; He's simply anti-hedonism.*

Fighting for Pleasures

Various assumptions lurk behind our demands for pleasure:

- *What I want is more important than what you want.*
- *My needs come before yours. My desires take priority.*
- *I want satisfaction and I expect you to cooperate.*

Of course, if the other person complies, no conflict ensues. But what if they resist? What if the two of us have contradictory goals? What if they are as demanding as we are? Then conflict is inevitable. We want *what* we want *when* we want it, and if someone threatens our satisfaction, we instantly stop considering them and focus on winning. Such self-centeredness produces war. Hedonism brings conflict.

War

War may seem like an overly harsh word to describe the results of selfishness. But James isn't exaggerating. The consequences James describes run the gamut from mild to severe: not just quarrels but wars and battles, not just conflicts but murderous fights. Call up from your own history memories of subtle power struggles. Remember times you've tried to block someone from interfering with your personal agenda. Recall stronger confrontations that demand a winner and a loser. Picture the full-scale wars you've triggered by trying to impose your will on an "enemy."

Both full-scale wars and milder conflicts stem from our belief that another person will deprive us of some pleasure to which we feel entitled. Interrupt my time to relax after a busy day? I get miffed. Fail to take me seriously? You wouldn't like my reaction. But I'm not all that different from you. James is talking to all of us. What sets you off? What triggers quarrels in your relationships? What pleasures do you demand? (Take some time, perhaps now, to think about how you'd answer these questions.)

Peace: Not Unity of Opinion, but Unity of Heart

Peace does not require that former enemies think alike. Differences of opinion may well continue, but heart issues shift. Rather than working against each other, peace-seekers work for each other. Instead of serving themselves, they serve the other person. In place of trying to force the other party to change, they mimic God and give the other freedom of choice. Though disagreement may persist, mutual enmity, selfishness and forcefulness cease. That, of course, only occurs if both parties want peace. Sometimes they don't.

In the absence of another's cooperation, the scope of peace narrows. We can't have *interpersonal* peace if the other person wants to remain an enemy. But no matter how the other person reacts, we can always have *internal* peace and we can always have peace with God. We can, on our own and without our enemy's cooperation, abandon our selfishness and our use of force. I'm not suggesting we embrace mindless passivity – we may still need to make tough decisions – but we don't have to make those decisions with rancor and hate. Wisdom at times dictates resistance; at other times it dictates yielding. Both a "no" and a "yes" can come from a godly, peace-loving heart.

Barriers to Peace

First of all, we must understand: God does not want every conflict resolved. Some conflicts *should* occur. When peace contradicts wisdom and undermines righteousness, God calls us to war. Spiritual warfare is a fact of life: we are to resist the evil one. Just as clear is the Lord's directive to resist when others invite us to sin. We must not cooperate either with evil or with persons encouraging evil. No ambiguity exists here. Less clear are the times we have a responsibility to warn another about a danger in their hearts, something that they have missed or ignored. Have you ever borne the burden of exposing another's sin? If so, you've likely questioned whether speaking to them is *really* God's will. And you've probably struggled with when and how to speak and had to face your reluctance to trigger an anticipated angry response. You *hope* they'll turn back to God, but if they don't? Then peace between the two of you vanishes. It must. Sometimes conflict is necessary.

A second barrier to peace comes from those who relish conflict and have mastered the art of opposition. How do you react when faced with such a skilled attacker? Most of us feel angry and confused, perhaps even helpless. Our sense of helplessness is partially accurate: we really don't have any ability to make an angry person hunger for peace. We can choose how we react, but our soft answer may not even make a dent in their wrath. We're faced with the fact that no human being has the ability to change another person's heart.

A third barrier lies within ourselves. When faced with conflict, our reactions tend to fall into one of two camps: flight or fight. Some of us opt for escape. We postpone and avoid until things escalate. Perhaps we withdraw within ourselves or go passive-aggressive or get depressed or fake a phony peace. Others of us are more openly confrontational. We intimidate and threaten, try to wear the other person down with our forceful demands, or perhaps gather others (our army) around us to help us win.

What a mess. Withdrawal ignores conflict and attack suffocates it, but neither resolves it. Both flight and fight bring heartache, not peace.

Conflict Avoiders

Fear motivates many to back off from conflict. Not just fear of being hurt, although that may loom large, but other fears as well. Fear of losing a relationship, fear of getting angry and losing our self-control, fear of losing our "good reputation," fear of saying something stupid and looking foolish.

And then there's guilt. Whether learned early in life or put on you by your current enemy, ingrained deep within many of us is a belief that it is wrong, even evil, to disagree. Did you ever get punished for having your own opinion? What about exposing a conflict – did you learn that doing so is taboo?

There's more. Feelings of helplessness may prompt us to shut-down: sometimes it seems futile to even try. Our enemy may intimidate us into silence, confuse us with their skilled attack, and leave us with a sense of hopelessness and worthlessness.

Our own selfishness also may play a part. Some of us withdraw because we simply don't want to be bothered; the other person isn't that important to us. Why waste energy on someone to whom you are indifferent?

Conflict Initiators

Do you tend towards aggressive intimidation? When any of us acts that way, we're operating under the illusion that we have the ability to change the person who's bothering us. We not only hope we can pull it off, we actually believe we can do so. Our belief is misplaced. Remember what I said earlier: no human being has the ability to change another's heart.

Most aggressive people aren't aware that fear motivates their acts. But think about it. If we want something badly – and the person we're with isn't cooperating – being peaceful looks rather useless. Being nice seems a sure way of being robbed of what we want. Our fear is a fear of loss. (If we're kind to them, won't they blithely go on depriving us?) And there's

another fear: the fear we'll be stuck with the other person's behavior. After all, we reason, if we don't get angry (or pushy or intimidating), they'll never learn how important it is that they change.

Three Questions for You to Answer

Think of a conflict between you and another person.

1. Do each of you have similar or different styles of dealing with conflict?
2. What fears influence you to avoid conflict?
3. What fears influence you to initiate conflict?

Three Things for You to Do

First take some time to learn about yourself. Fill out the chart below. Doing so will help you connect your own demands for pleasure with areas where you and another person experience conflict. Please, do this individually – I want you to gain some understanding of your own motives before you try to dialog with the other party.

An Area of Conflict	The Pleasure I Demand
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.

Second, take some time to learn about the other person. Talk with each other about what is valuable to each of you. Explore what you each fear losing.

Third, take some time to learn how God thinks. Read through the book of James to learn more about how hedonism brings conflict. You'll gain wisdom about both conflict and peace.