

SINFUL CONFLICTS

AND GOD'S VIEW



James 4:1-6

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Introduction to the passage

We must never forget that, as Christians, we are all engaged in a spiritual warfare. We are called upon to fight against every form of evil in ourselves and in the world around us. Unfortunately, we all too often find ourselves fighting against our fellow-Christians; this is very grievous to the Lord and it is this that James condemns in these verses. In 3:16 he has said that when we have envy and selfish ambitions, this causes disruption in the church. It seems that James was so troubled about the problems that this kind of thing was causing among God's people that here in 4:1-6 he returns to it and hits it very hard indeed.

What these verses mean

Verse 1

What causes fights and quarrels among you?

This does not mean that every church at that time had this kind of problem, but it was sufficiently widespread for James to deal with it openly in this way. Sadly, we have to admit that, all too often, churches have been ruined by inner conflict (1 Co. 3:3).

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

It is very important that we stand for what is right and for the truth, but we can easily deceive ourselves. When we think we are fighting for sound doctrine, we are so often contending for our own ideas and our own position in the church. So, James says, the conflicts arise from within ourselves, driven by our own desires and what gives us pleasure or satisfaction. The word translated "desires" could be rendered "pleasures", and is most often used in a bad sense, as for example in Luke 8:14.

Verse 2

You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want.

In this context "kill" is probably meant in the sense of anger giving rise to hatred. To hate and to covet are terrible sins with dreadful consequences. Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount that murder is not just the physical act of killing, but includes anger and character assassination (Matt. 6:21-22). However, James will not have excluded the taking of a life from what he was writing. The desires that arise from a sinful nature can, if not controlled, lead to murder being committed. What started as an evening walk on the palace roof for King David finally ended in the murder of Uriah. (See 2 Samuel 11.)

You quarrel and fight. You do not have,

This is true to life. So often we scheme and struggle to get what we want. We show little or no concern for the hurt we cause other people in the process. Very often it is all in vain and we fail to gain our point or whatever we fought for. But even when we succeed, we find that the result does not satisfy or give the pleasure we had expected. And all this at the price of discord and bitterness generally.

because you do not ask God.

The right way is to discover God's will. We don't do this because we think we know best and we hate the idea that we will be proved wrong. Prayer is the way to discover God's will in a given matter and to submit ourselves to him. We may pray, but miss out the very things we should be asking God for because we are not being honest with ourselves.

Verse 3

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

This is helpful light on what we sometimes think of as unanswered prayer. Here, it is not that God has not heard, nor is it that he has not answered. His answer is something like this, "Before we go any further, I want you to examine yourself and ask yourself if your request is right, or if it is some-

thing of which I would approve! Also I want you to ask yourself if your reason for your request is a selfish one or will it benefit other people as well as yourself? Or are you just wanting a comfortable life?" Too often prayer can be used to justify our conduct or even to enlist God to our side.

Verse 4

You adulterous people,

Having examined the root cause of strife and unrest James now turns his attention to look at people whose lives are characterised by self-centred sins. He is writing his letter to Christians, and now, in particular, addresses those who may have slidden backwards in their faith. James is describing the typical actions of the unfaithful conduct of unconverted people. This is unacceptable behaviour for Christians in their relationship with God. The language James uses is very strong, but it reflects the way the Old Testament prophets spoke to the people of their day. Hosea was instructed to take an unfaithful woman, Gomer, as his wife. The prophet in his deep distress was able to understand God's feelings and addressed the people from the heart. Other Old Testament prophets spoke on the subject (Jer.3:6-7) as did the Lord Jesus (Matt. 12:39). Isaiah said, "Your Maker is your husband" (Isaiah 54:5) and in the New Testament Jesus is seen as the bridegroom (Matt. 25:1-13; Rev. 21:1-2). This is why people who love other gods or worldly pleasure instead of the Lord are regarded as adulterers.

don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God?

There were times when people in Israel longed to go back to Egypt (Num. 11:4-6; 1 Co. 10). They forgot the terrible slavery and oppression of those days. In the same way God's people down the ages have been foolish enough to revert to love for the pleasures of the world and its people. James makes his readers face up to what this really means, just as Jesus said (Matt.6:24). Christians are people God has called out of the world to serve him, their hearts having been transformed and minds renewed. Friendship with the world would be turning one's back upon God and a denial of his grace and goodness. This is seen by James as preferring the world to God.

Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

The really shocking possibility here is that we might not just drift into worldly ways, but that we might do so by deliberate choice. James probes his readers very deeply and leaves them with no possibility of misunderstanding what he means, or the serious consequences of the direction of their lives.

Verse 5

Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?

This is a difficult verse for two reasons. The first reason is that there is no verse in the rest of the Bible that is anything like the words we have here. The best conclusion we can reach is that what James is about to say is something that can be deduced from other Scriptures. The second difficulty is uncertainty about the translation of the words, "the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely". If this is the right translation, it reflects God's creation of men when he "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Gen.2:7) As a result of man's fall into sin, his inner being became prone to what James has described in verses 1-4 (Mark 7:20-23).

Another possible translation, found in the margin of the New International Version, is this: "The Spirit he caused to live in us longs jealously." In this case the meaning would be that just as jealousy is aroused in a husband whose wife is unfaithful to him, so is God deeply offended and grieved when his people love the world more than they love him. The work of the Spirit in us is to arouse our appreciation of God's feelings in order to draw our hearts back to the Lord. This harmonises with what follows –

Verse 6

But he gives us more grace.

God will not allow his people to continue in unfaithfulness, but inclines our hearts back to himself. This is part of the Spirit's work of grace within us. That work of grace goes on to strengthen our resolve and ability to be true to him.

That is why Scripture says:

James quotes from Proverbs 3:34 to show his readers how they can know the amazing grace of God.

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

If we persist in the kind of conduct described in verses 1-4, it is an exhibition of pride. Of all sin pride is the one that most affronts God. Other sins are against his laws, but pride challenges the whole being of God and his sovereignty. God therefore resists the proud by refusing to speak to them and by removing their status. If we refuse to humble ourselves, the Lord will find ways of doing it for us. Those who humbly repent and change their ways will enjoy the Lord's pardon, and his enabling to pursue godliness. Jesus taught that unless a person changes and becomes like a little child, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Humility is the abandonment of all goodness in oneself and the throwing oneself on the mercy of God as a spiritually bankrupt person. It is only in this state that a person experiences God's grace in salvation and in his walking as a Christian.



Summary

Underlying these verses is the principle that our relationship with others arises from our relationship with God. If we are out of harmony with our fellow church members, it may be because we are out of harmony with the Lord. The root cause arises from our uncontrolled selfish desires. Such desires can end in killing, sometimes physically but mostly attacking another person's reputation. We find ourselves in this position because we have not prayed about what we really need; and because we have not asked according to his will, God has not given. God looks upon such a person as being backslidden, which is compared to an unfaithful partner in a marriage relationship. Such a person is preferring the ways of this world rather than the kingdom of God. God's Spirit, who indwells the believer is aroused and longs jealously for the person to humble himself again, otherwise God will withhold his grace until the pride of the person is dealt with. This is a development of the foundational position, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps.111:10). Such fear is a blend of awe and love, and when we have this, we will be wise in our dealings with others.



A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses

Theme: Some lessons about prayer

These verses contain warning about the wrong use of prayer. We can use them to extract some basic lessons on the subject of prayer.

I The neglect of prayer

1. We can neglect prayer without realising it.
2. We should have regular times for prayer each day.
3. Even if we do this, it can become a matter of routine, and we may go through the form of prayer without the reality. This is the same as neglect.

II The consequences of neglect

1. We lose our sense of the love of God, our dependence on him and responsibility to him.

2. This in turn affects our attitude to others and we fail in our fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

NOTE Divisive conduct arises from a defective relationship with God.

III There is wrong use of prayer

1. We can use prayer to persuade ourselves that God approves of what we are doing.
2. We can use prayer as a means of pleasing ourselves and trying to get our own way.

IV Prayer should be a channel of God's grace

Prayer should be –

1. A means of humbling ourselves before God, and submitting ourselves to his way.
2. A means of humbling ourselves before our fellow-believers with a view to harmony and peace.



Focus Point 1: Grace

The word "grace" is very rich in meaning. It is most precious to believers when it is applied to salvation, especially in Paul's letters (Rom. 3:24; 2 Tim. 1:8-10). In this case it means that God has loved us and given his Son Jesus Christ for us, despite the fact that, not only did we not by any means deserve it, but that we deserved judgement not mercy.

Grace means that our salvation began entirely in the wisdom and love of God, and that it continues to be dependent on him until we reach the glory. We can rightly expand our definition of grace as the love, wisdom and power of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit exerted for the beginning, the continuing and the completion of the salvation of those deserving only his wrath.

The same word is used in other ways. For example, it refers to our position as people acceptable to God (Rom. 5:2); to the enabling God gives us to live lives that please him (2 Co. 12:9; 2 Tim. 2:1); and to the quality of what we say and do as believers (Col. 4:6; 2 Co. 8:7).

See also the Focus Point in Galatians Book 1, Study 2 (page 18) for further notes on the description of Grace



Focus Point 2: The jealousy of God

Jealousy is applied to God in Scripture (Ex. 34:14; Josh. 24:19), but we must be careful how we understand this. Whenever we apply human emotions to God, such as anger, love, hatred or jealousy, we must be sure to rid them of the sinful elements that are always present when they apply to us. For instance, jealousy in us means that we lack something others possess, or that something has happened to wound our pride. When we read that God is jealous, it describes the intensity of his love for his people and his desire for their commitment to him (Zech. 8:2), and his anger when he is dishonoured (Deut. 6:15).

Paul harmonised with the Lord in his feelings for the Corinthian church (2 Co. 11:2).



Over to you

Since discord in the church arises from members having a defective walk with God, do you think there are times when we should give more attention in our ministry to the need for a right relationship with God, instead of trying to solve the problems themselves?

What do your people pray about? Are there more selfish motives than matters concerning the glory of God and his kingdom? How will you address this?

On what basis do people think they are Christians? Did they really experience God's grace through a humbling experience of their unworthiness and sinful life? Or did they just think it would be a good idea to become a Christian because it served a selfish motive? (The answer you give will dictate how you will deal with a discordant situation in your church.)