

James 14 – Wisdom about Selfishness
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Relationships are falling apart everywhere we turn. People are leaving marriages, leaving churches, leaving friends. This is so sad. The saddest part is that most people want to make relationships work – they just don't know how. Many people have not been taught how to make relationships work.

Many of us buy into the Hollywood mentality that if we are truly in love, relationships will just work by themselves. As soon as it gets difficult – people feel at a loss about what to do and they don't have the commitment to see it through. I believe most people want to love others and want their relationships to work, they just don't know how to make them work.

We are in a sermon series on James called Wisdom for Everyday Life. I believe if we gain biblical wisdom, we can make our relationships work. We are not doomed to failure.

We just finished preaching through James 3, which could be titled how to win friends and influence people. James taught us to bring our tongues under control, to use words for good not evil, to encourage, heal, and build up rather than to discourage, tear down and destroy.

James taught us that godly wisdom should be demonstrated in the way that we live. That wisdom is pure, peaceable, merciful, gentle, and sincere. And James said if we seek to live in peace with each other, the fruit of righteousness will come forth. But in contrast to peace, James 4:1-3 says:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from the evil desires that war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want to spend what you get on your pleasures.

Let me lay some groundwork here:

- Conflict is inevitable – war is optional!
 The question is not will we have conflict?
 The question is how we will respond to it.
- There are different ways to handle conflict, but
- There is one major source of conflict

I'm going to preach on these issues – the heart of conflict – this week in a message entitled Wisdom about Selfishness.

We need to realize that **conflict is not necessarily bad**. What is important is how we deal with it because if we don't deal with it correctly – it always escalates into something worse.

One of the ways many people deal with conflict is by not dealing with it – they avoid it. There are others who seem to turn everything into a conflict. They don't pick their battles – to them everything is a battle. What's important is that we handle conflict in such a way that it doesn't escalate into all-out war.

A conflict is simply “a difference in ideas or interests.” Don't think it's strange that you have conflicts. Two people raised in different homes in different places by different families will see some things differently. They will have different opinions, ideas, and interests. That's OK. The key is learning how to resolve the differences.

When we express our conflicting ideas – that's a disagreement. Disagreements are OK. It's just two people expressing different ways of thinking or looking at something. However - if it's not done in love – a disagreement can become an argument. An argument is a dispute with intense disagreement. Even Bible heroes got into arguments. In Acts 15:2 some men taught that Gentiles must obey Jewish laws to be saved and

Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them.

Saying their dispute was not small is a nice way of saying they had a big argument.

If not resolved - arguments can escalate into fights. A fight involves attacking and defending. It goes from disagreeing with the other person to attacking the other person which can include put downs and name calling. It can become a heated verbal exchange or even a physical battle where people come to blows.

If left unresolved – fights become wars. Wars are ongoing battles - hostile conflicts that will not end without a truce or a peace treaty. People at war are openly antagonistic – they don't even try to hide it.

Some translations translate the terms “fights and quarrels” that James uses as “wars and fightings” or “feuds and conflicts.” That's because James is using military terms here. These terms can be used for wars between nations or people groups. James is mainly addressing church conflicts. But these terms can also be used for wars between spouses or family members or church members or co-workers or neighbors or friends.

The word quarrel refers to a fight. But the word war refers to an ongoing campaign of battles. Some of you have occasional conflicts – we all do. But some are living in a constant state of warfare. My brothers and sisters, this should not be!

We need to learn to resolve conflicts at the disagreement level so that they don't escalate into arguments, fights, or thermonuclear war. To do that – we need to know the source of fights and wars. Don't just concentrate on fruit, lay the ax to the root!

If I asked you the source of your conflicts – you would probably think of another person or people and the things they do to cause conflict. In other words – it's someone else's fault! However – James says differently in James 4:1

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from the evil desires that war within you?

James shows us that the root of fighting and war is our own flesh – our selfishness. According to James, selfishness causes us to be at war with ourselves, with each other, and ultimately with God.

Now hear me well – not all conflict is due to selfishness. Remember we are all different and have conflicting opinions. However – fights and wars usually originate in selfishness. Selfishness says whatever I want is most important, my priorities must take precedence, my perspectives are most valid.

Selfishness – another word for our flesh – is the source of our struggles. The flesh cannot be improved – it must die. It's only when we are dead to self that we can truly love others and handle conflict wisely.

Selfishness fails to recognize that others may have interests that are equally legitimate. But rather than die to self – we tend to justify ourselves – excuse our flesh. How do we do this? By saying things like –

“If you hadn't done that – I wouldn't have responded like I did.”

Or – “You made me do it.”

Or – “It's your fault I acted this way.”

We justify our flesh when we take on a victim mentality that blames someone else for our actions.

They may be wrong in what they did – but that does not let us off the hook and excuse us from responding in a Christ like manner. The only way out of this dilemma is to die to self. And it's not a one-time event. It's an ongoing process. Paul understood this. In 1 Corinthians 15:31 he said – *I die daily*.

We die to self when we say no to ourselves for the sake of others. 2 Corinthians 4:10-12 says:

We always carry in our mortal bodies the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our bodies. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that His life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

The amazing thing about dying to self is that it works life in others. When my wife and I have conflicts – sometimes I handle it right and sometimes I don't. Sometimes I act selfishly by attacking her or being defensive and not admitting my wrongs. However – the times when I do get it right and I do die to myself by refusing to justify my flesh by admitting my wrongdoing – it's hard – it's literally a death to self – but it always works life in her.

She responds totally differently because I've removed the source of conflict – selfishness. That's a much wiser way to live. It is not wise to live selfishly in conflict with God and others. So, you must attack it at its source and lay the ax to the root!

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from the evil desires that war within you?

Your war with others originates in the war within you. The war within you causes wars with others. So – **the key to overcoming wars with others is to win the war within you!** But what do we usually do? Blame others and excuse ourselves.

Oh – they've got a war going on within themselves too. But that's their issue. You cannot win their war for them. You've got to concentrate on winning the war within you!

James tells us that these wars originate in the sinful selfish desires within each one of us. The word is actually lust – the sinful desire to have something you do not have. James 4:2 says:

You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them.

James again uses a military metaphor to describe the war within us. The verb is in the present tense and so it means constantly fighting. This constant internal struggle is between the spirit and the flesh. Galatians 5:16-17 says:

Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh is opposed to the spirit, and the spirit is opposed to the flesh; and these two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions.

The source of wars and fights among Christians is always the same. There is a root of selfishness that causes an internal war within the believer which can result in external fights with others. No two believers who are both walking in the Spirit of God towards each other can live with wars and fights among themselves. I've seen a lot of church conflicts in my life. And the interesting thing is that both sides in the conflict usually claim their way is the will of God and they are being led by the Spirit of God.

But James tells us that the Holy Spirit does not create desires within us that result in envy, jealousy, critical attitudes, wars, or anything sinful. That is coming from our flesh, not the Spirit of God.

The types of desires that lead to conflict are described by James 4:2. Covetousness leads to conflict (you lust and do not have). Jealousy leads to hatred and conflict and murder.

James uses the word kill to startle us - to force us to realize the depth of the evil in in our bitter hatred toward others. Again, James looked back to the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus also used murder to express more than actual killing, but also as an inward condition of heart, shown outwardly by anger and hatred.

James says you go through all this fussing and fighting and you still don't have what you want. This points to the futility of a life lived for the desires of the flesh. Not only is it a life of conflict, but it is also a fundamentally unfulfilled life. Here James is declaring that many of our problems come from greed, selfishness, and wrong motives. James 4:3 says:

Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want to spend what you get on your pleasures.

James gives us two reasons we don't have what we want – either not praying or praying with wrong motives. I want to talk about prayerlessness for a moment. There are many people operating under the delusion that if God wants you to have something – He will just automatically give it to you. Wrong!

Yes, there are things God gives us by His grace that we don't even know we need. But James gives us an important principle: you have not because you ask not! This a virtual spiritual law: that God does not give unless we ask. This was even true for Jesus. Psalm 2 is a messianic Psalm about Jesus who says to the Father:

I will declare the decree: The Lord has said to Me, “You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession.”

Charles Spurgeon said: “If the divine Son of God cannot be exempted from the rule of asking that He may have, you and I cannot expect the rule to be relaxed in our favor. Why should it be?” If we receive nothing without asking God, I beg you to see how absolutely vital prayer is!

Spurgeon also said: “All heaven lies before the grasp of the asking man; all the promises of God are rich and inexhaustible, and their fulfillment is to be had by prayer.”

The principle is: you have not because you ask not!

Then James gives another principle – we have not when we ask with wrong motives by praying selfish prayers that do not regard the will of God or the needs of other people.

Prayers are not answered when you ask wrongly and selfishly. This is the exact opposite of 1 John 5:14 -15 which says:

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us — we know that we have what we asked of Him.

Prayer will be answered only if it is in accordance with the will of God. Ask wrongly may mean "ask for wrong things" or "ask with wrong motives." The reason why some prayer is wrong is that people ask in order to spend it on their passions and pleasures.

The Greek word used for spend means to consume and to waste. It is the same exact word used to describe the prodigal son who spent all he had on worldly pleasures. By the way, the word prodigal means wasteful. God does not answer prodigal prayers that are focused on self-indulgence, wasteful spending, or squandering God's resources.

So – when we pray wrongly and selfishly, we should not expect the Lord to give us what we ask for. But when we pray according to His will, He will answer.

By the way, many people misunderstand the purpose of prayer. The purpose of prayer is never to get your will done upon the earth. **The purpose of prayer is to get to know God and to accomplish His will.**

Many of our prayers have selfish motivation behind them, and many times we are not even aware of the selfish motivation. God will not answer selfish prayers. Jesus addressed this in Matthew 6:5-6

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Jesus is not saying to never pray in public. There are many public prayers in the Bible. Jesus is addressing the motive for prayer – which in this case was to be seen by men. Jesus said if your motive is to be seen by people, then that is your full reward – being seen by people.

But the motivation for God-centered prayer is for God to be seen. The motivation for a God-centered prayer is for God to be glorified. The motivation for a God-centered prayer is for God's will to be done.

Sometimes we ask and don't receive because the motive behind our asking is really to accomplish our will rather than God's will. And if my will is in conflict with God's will, God is not going to change His will to accommodate my will! God is not subservient to me; I am subservient to Him.

And the purpose of prayer is never to change the mind of God to see things my way. The purpose of prayer is not to persuade a reluctant God to do our bidding. The purpose of prayer is to align our will with His, and in partnership with Him, to ask Him to accomplish His will on this earth.

It's okay to ask for things we need, but we must always submit to God's will. That's what Jesus did the night He was betrayed. Matthew 26:39 says:

He fell on His face, and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will."

That's how Jesus taught us to pray in Matthew 6:9-10

This is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

He goes on to tell us to pray that our daily needs will be met, but He says to start prayer by praise and submission to God's will. And we get to know the will of God through the Word and prayer! Paul said in Colossians 1:9

We ask God to give you complete knowledge of His will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding.

We prayed last week for wisdom and I encouraged you to pray for wisdom every day. Today I encourage you to ask God to give you complete knowledge of His will because godly wisdom is knowing and doing the will of God!

God-centered prayers prioritize God's will over our will.

God-centered prayers glorify God, not self.

God-centered prayers seek to extend God's kingdom, not ours.

God-centered prayers are based on God's word, not our words.

God-centered prayers do not change God, but they do change us!

That change starts as we overcome selfishness by dying to self and our will and that change continues as we submit to God and His will!

If we walk in the Spirit we will not fulfill the lust of the flesh!