

Relational Conflict: It's Cause and Cure

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James 4:1-10
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Sermon Theme: The root cause of relational conflict is unfulfilled, idolatrous desires. The cure is humble repentance. The cure is humble submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ rather than the lordship of our own personal desires.

Overview of Passage: A survey of the text was given.

Three Principles of Conflict-Resolving Wisdom

Principle #1: In conflict, consider what you want that you are not getting.

- In verses one and two James identifies the primary cause of all human conflict: Passions at war within you. You desire and do not have. You covet and cannot obtain.
- When we find ourselves in relational conflict, a critical diagnostic question to ask is: “what is it I want that I am not getting?” In other words, “What desire right now, in this moment, is functionally ruling my heart? What desire for perhaps even something good, has become so strong that it is functionally an idol that is ruling me right now?”
- Often when we find ourselves in conflict, we are blind to the spiritual infection within, to the inordinate desires within, producing the painful symptom of relational conflict. One reason for our blindness is our desires themselves can often be good.

“the evil in our desires often lies not in what we want but in the fact that we want it too much. Natural affections become inordinate, ruling cravings. We are meant to be ruled by godly passions and desires...Grasping that the evil lies in the ruling status of the desire, not in the object, is frequently a turning point in self-understanding, in seeing the need for Christ’s mercies, and in changing.” - David Powlison, summarizing insight drawn from John Calvin

"Idolatry happens when we take good things and make them ultimate things." -- Timothy Keller

- In other words, idolatry is turning good things into idols that control us.
- So here is a simple way we can all apply this. The next time you find yourself in relational conflict -- ask yourself the question “What is it that I want that I am not getting? What idolatrous desire is ruling me right now? What good thing am I making an ultimate thing?” It could be a desire for respect, approval, love, appreciation, comfort, control or any number of good things you have turned into an ultimate thing.

- The good news is as we learn to discern our own cravings, our own idols of the heart that tend to rule us, there is tremendous hope for change.
- If I can I identify specifically my own cravings that are contributing to conflict -- well then I can repent of my idolatry.
- Book Recommendation: Counterfeit God's by Timothy Keller

Principle #2: In conflict, and at all times, diligently watch over your own heart.

- In verse 4, James says “You adulterous people” and proceeds to correct them for their worldliness.
- Psalm 16 says, “the sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply.”
- It is very sobering to consider that when we allow good desires to become ruling desires we put ourselves in the camp of those who are running after other gods...which helps us understand why James, like an OT prophet, so strongly rebukes his readers for committing spiritual adultery.
- He draws attention to the fact that when we allow desires for things other than God to control us and rule us, we in reality, run after counterfeit gods, just like the world around us...and we actually, perhaps unknowingly, behave as enemies of God.
- Those who don't know Christ are ruled by ruled by vain idols: money, romantic love, ease and comfort, control, power, fame and the approval of other people etc...
- James' point in verse 4 of our passage is -- when the people of God are controlled by those same idols – they are literally committing spiritual adultery.
- Verse 4 helps us to understand how seriously God takes our idolatry. He sees it as a kind of spiritual betrayal.
- We do well to heed the wisdom of Proverbs 4:23 and the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:33

Proverbs 4:23 Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life.

Matthew 6:33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Principle #3 In conflict, seek to humble yourself.

- The divinely prescribed cure for relational conflict: humility. That's what verses 6-10 are – an exhortation to wholehearted, humble repentance.
- James punctuates this section in verse 10 with the command: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”
- So the imperative, the command is “humble yourselves” ...That means in conflict that is what you must do; it is what I must do. In relational conflict, there is no other biblical alternative—we must voluntarily and proactively humble ourselves.

Questions for Discussion/Application

- Re-read the text, James 4:1-10. What initial insights and observations do you have from reading this passage?
- Read these quotes and take a few minutes as a group to discuss what they mean.

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- How do inordinate desires cause conflict?
- What desires for you can at times become idolatrous, controlling desires? Typical idols include idols of respect, approval, love, appreciation, comfort, control.
- How can asking the question "What is it I want that I am not getting?" reveal desires that are idolatrous and help us to repent quickly when we find ourselves in conflict?
- What does it look like practically to humble ourselves before God and others in conflict?
- Consider taking time to pray, asking God to help us to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness, to watch our hearts diligently, and to not yield to idolatrous desires that can control us.