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James / James 4:1–12

I have a public service announcement as I begin the message today: We are not here to decide who in the church needs to hear this message most. We are here to ask what God might be saying to each one of us.

As mentioned a couple of weeks ago in James chapter 3, James enjoys rhetorical questions, and he continues this. Again why? Because it is a way to focus the message he has more directly on the recipient, getting the reader to ask themself, am I part of this category? It forces them, and now us, to consider what he is saying instead of just saying, oh he's speaking to someone else. And we have all been in this situation, as we hear from James today.

James first begins chapter 4 with "these conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?" James is now hoping that he has you asking yourself, where do your conflicts come from? We've all been in conflict and disputes. If you say no then you're lying and that is a whole different message. So, we are to ask ourselves what are the origins of our conflict and disputes? Do you usually blame the other person? They started it, they have the wrong motives, they this or

that.

James directs our attention to the desires at work within us. He wants us to recognize how our own cravings, jealousy, pride, and selfish ambitions can give rise to conflict. Rather than focusing only on what someone else has done, he challenges us to examine what is happening in our own hearts.

Do we stop long enough to consider the part we might have played in the conflict? Perhaps it was something we said, the way we said it, an assumption we made, or an expectation we had that was never met or talked about. Maybe we felt overlooked, disrespected, or misunderstood, and instead of addressing it honestly, we allowed resentment to take root. Sometimes we are so busy pointing out what the other person has done wrong that we fail to examine what is happening in our own hearts. We focus on winning the argument rather than restoring the relationship. We want the other person to admit they are wrong, to apologize, or to change, but we are not always so willing to do those things ourselves. And before we know it, a small disagreement has grown into something much bigger, creating distance, bitterness, and division. Perhaps the question isn't just, "Why are we fighting?" but "What is happening within me that is contributing to this conflict?" Because if we are going to find the roots of our disputes, we need to be willing to look beyond the

other person's actions and allow God to examine our own hearts. And that’s what James is getting to in the first part of this chapter.

I searched for the common disputes in churches and here is some of the list, all of which I have seen in churches, no matter the denomination:

1. Worship and music: There will often be disagreements around traditional hymns versus contemporary worship songs. Piano music versus a worship band. The volume or style of music. There is often an underlying issue: One group may value familiarity, reverence, and tradition, while another values accessibility, engagement, and reaching new people. A disagreement over music can become a deeper conflict over whose preferences and spiritual experiences matter.
2. Leadership and authority: Conflict over who makes decisions and how much authority leaders should have. Common disputes are a pastor’s leadership style or decisions, or disagreements within deacons or church boards. Who makes the decisions? Someone who is controlling, or are there those who resist leadership? There are power struggles between influential members or families. The underlying issue: Trust, control, accountability, and differing understandings of biblical leadership.

3. Money and finances: Financial disagreements can become emotional because money represents both practical needs and deeply held priorities. There will be differences on how the church budget should be allocated. Spending money on a building renovation versus outreach or missions. Whether to hire additional staff. Questions about financial transparency or how donations are used. The underlying issue: Different priorities, concerns about stewardship, and sometimes a lack of trust.
4. Theological and biblical disagreements: Stemming from biblical interpretation and the authority of Scripture, which leads to how some things are believed, practiced, and talked about. There will be differences on the church's position on contemporary ethical and social issues. What does it mean to live a faithful Christian life? The underlying issue: Differing interpretations of Scripture, different theological traditions, and differing convictions about which beliefs are essential to Christian faith.
5. Personal conflicts and hurt feelings: Someone feels overlooked or excluded. A comment from someone within the church causes offense. Gossip, rumours, or negative comments are spread through the congregation about others in the congregation. A disagreement is discussed with everyone except the person involved or someone feels someone

or something received preferential treatment. Old wounds are brought into new disagreements. The underlying issue: Pride, unmet expectations, poor communication, unresolved hurt, and a desire to be heard or vindicated. These conflicts can become particularly destructive when people form opposing camps and begin interpreting every action through the lens of the dispute.

6. And last (but certainly not least and there are many more I could add), change versus tradition: We often struggle when some propose changes to long-established practices, such as: Changing the order or format of worship. Introducing new technology. Revising church policies or traditions. Adopting new approaches to ministry and outreach. The underlying issue: Some people fear losing the church they love, while others fear the church will stop growing if nothing changes.

The disagreement itself is not necessarily the greatest problem; the way we treat one another in the disagreement may be. So, ask yourself: What is happening in my heart that is contributing to this conflict?

We would be naive to think that these disputes, and others, do not exist within the church. They do, and probably more frequently than we sometimes want to let ourselves believe. Church conflicts often begin with

legitimate disagreements, but can escalate as people feel hurt, misunderstood, or disrespected. People take sides, private conversations and rumours spread, and disagreements become matters of loyalty. Eventually, trust breaks down, relationships suffer, and division leads to people leaving or resigning. The tragedy is that churches can become divided not necessarily because of the original disagreement, but because they lose the ability to listen to, trust, and love one another through it.

James brings us back to the question with which we began: Where do our quarrels and conflicts come from? He calls us to examine not only the issue we are debating but also the motives within our own hearts. And then he reminds us that we are not the ultimate judge of one another. God is. So, what do we do? Thankfully, James doesn't leave us with our failures. James 4:6 “But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.””

Notice what James says: "But he gives all the more grace." That is good news for every one of us, because if we are honest, we have all contributed to conflict at some point. We have all said things we wish we could take back. We have all allowed pride to get in the way. We have all wanted to be heard without always being willing to listen. But God does not simply point out our

failures and leave us there. He offers us grace. Grace gives us the freedom to admit that we were wrong. Grace allows us to let go of our need to win. Grace invites us to seek forgiveness, to extend forgiveness, and to begin again. The question is not whether we have ever contributed to conflict. The question is whether we are willing to let God change us when he shows us what is happening in our hearts.

James continues, “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”

Humbleness. Draw near to God. Purify our heart. Ask: What is happening in my heart that is contributing to this conflict?

Paul appeals to the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 1:10–13, to overcome their divisions and be united in Christ. This challenges us, as believers, to not let personal loyalties divide the body of Christ. You might say, but I have differences to how they see it. Paul says to maintain unity despite these differences.
In Ephesians 4:1–6, Paul calls believers to humility, gentleness, patience, and love, making every effort to

maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. And when someone has hurt us, Jesus gives us practical guidance. In Matthew 18, he tells us to go and speak directly with the person involved. Not to begin by telling everyone else what happened, not to gather people to our side, but to seek an honest conversation. The goal is not to win or humiliate the other person. It is to seek understanding, address what is wrong, and work toward restoration wherever possible.

Maintaining unity does not mean that we will always agree. Nor does it mean that we should ignore important questions, remain silent when something is wrong, or pretend that every decision is right. There are times when we need to have difficult conversations. There are times when we need to stand firm in our convictions. There are times when we need to challenge a decision or ask for accountability. But even when we disagree, we are still called to treat one another with humility, gentleness, patience, and love. Unity does not mean we all think alike. It means that our disagreements do not give us permission to stop loving one another.

Many church disputes are presented as arguments about music, money, leadership, theology, or change. But beneath those issues, deeper questions are often at work: Do I feel heard and valued? Am I afraid of losing something important to me? Do I trust the people

making this decision? Am I willing to consider that I might be wrong? Am I more concerned with getting my way or seeking God's will? Can I love someone with whom I strongly disagree?

When there are quarrels within the church we need to ask ourself: Are we fighting to protect the church of Jesus Christ, or are we fighting to protect our own preferences, positions, and traditions? When conflict arises, am I more concerned with proving that I am right, or with reflecting Christ in the way I respond? We need to examine our heart before disagreements become division. God calls to be united in Christ.

Before I sat down to write this message on Monday morning the song that kept playing in my head was, I Surrender, the song we sang earlier today. I didn't know at the time why that song but I was enjoying it. I then opened one of my Bibles to the passage of James we had come to for today and saw the devotion beside it that read, Surrender: Obedience in Love. I want to read you a short excerpt, "Surrender to the authority of the Word of God leads the believer to the challenge of submitting their own will to God. Complete trust in God demands that a person relinquish all rights to direct the course of their own life. By surrendering to God's will, they affirm that their heavenly Father knows best. Personal aspirations become secondary to God's divine plan. James pointed out the practical value of

submission. Those who submit to God's will come under God's care."

And I began thinking about what surrender really means when it comes to conflict. It is easy to sing, "I surrender all," when we are thinking about our general relationship with God. But what happens when surrender means letting go of our need to be right? What happens when it means admitting that our words have hurt someone? What happens when it means releasing our resentment, our pride, or our desire to have things done our way? What happens when God asks us to love someone with whom we strongly disagree? Perhaps surrender begins when we stop asking God to change everyone else and ask him to begin with us.

And so as this message was finished another song came into my head. As we listen to *Change My Heart, O God*, I invite you to spend these moments in prayer. Ask God to search your heart. Is there resentment you have been holding on to? Is there someone you have been speaking about rather than speaking to? Is there a disagreement in which you have become more concerned with winning than with loving? Is there pride, fear, jealousy, or a desire for control that you need to surrender to God? And perhaps there is hurt in your heart, too. Perhaps you have been wronged. If so, you do not have to pretend that the hurt isn't

real. Bring that hurt to God as well, and ask him to show you the next faithful step toward truth, healing, forgiveness, or reconciliation. We cannot control the hearts of others. We cannot force someone else to listen, apologize, or change. But we can ask God to work in us. Because before we can hope to see healing in our relationships and unity in the church, we must be willing to let God work in our own hearts. Churches are not strengthened simply because disagreements disappear. They are strengthened when people learn to bring their disagreements under the lordship of Christ. May we ask, Lord, when conflict comes, what needs to change in me so that I can reflect you more faithfully?

So, as we listen, let this be our prayer: "Change my heart, O God. Make it ever true. Change my heart, O God. May I be like you."