

Cravings and Conflicts

by C.J. Mahaney

It has been ten years now since the first godly young man requested permission to marry one of my daughters. Today, all three girls are married and it brings me great joy to observe my sons-in-law as they lead and care for my daughters and six grandchildren.

My wife, Carolyn, and I had the privilege of providing pre-marital counseling for each couple. During our times together, we reminded them of the significance of the marriage relationship in Scripture, of the importance of complementarian roles in marriage, and the biblical priority of romance and the sexual relationship.

But we also intentionally interrupted their romantic trance in order to prepare them for an inevitable reality of married life: relational conflict. We did this by a careful examination of James 4:1-2.

Over the years, each couple has repeatedly expressed the difference this passage has made in their marriage. But James 4 has application far beyond marriage! These truths apply to all Christians—regardless of age, gender, or marital status. That's because we are all familiar with the harsh reality of relational conflict.

In fact, it is with great confidence that I can predict: you will face relational conflict in your future. Not only your distant future, but your immediate future. Whether between husbands and wives, parents and children, pastors and church members, employers and employees, professors and students, friends, or relatives, conflict will occur. For as sinners living in a fallen world, conflict is inevitable and in fact, is heading your way right now. You can count on it.

The question is: are you prepared for conflict?

Divine Interruption

In James 4, God interrupts our often romantic and selfish view of life and graciously prepares us for relational conflict. He also identifies the root issue underlying conflict and provides life-transforming wisdom for resolving conflict. Let's make eye contact with God and receive his wisdom by reading, considering and responding to James 4:1-2:

“What causes quarrels, and what causes fights among you? Is it not this: that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.”

Serious relational conflict existed among the original recipients of this letter. This is no flattering portrayal of the early church. Although the recipients were genuinely converted, there was the distinct presence of relational hostility and the marked absence of reconciliation and relational harmony. Notice the plural in verse one: “quarrels”... “fights.” These were not occasional events, but common. It is a chronic condition that James is addressing here.

Particularly interesting is the fact that James does not specify the nature of the conflicts (although we could certainly speculate based on the rest of the letter). By deliberately (and brilliantly) making a general reference to “quarrels” and “fights,” James refuses to draw attention to the potentially distracting circumstances. The occasion and the issues are irrelevant to James, because they aren't the source. Instead, he highlights the underlying biblical categories by which we can best understand every conflict.

What James understood—and what we must understand as well—is that the circumstances of a particular conflict can never be the root cause. Nor can they alter the root cause. That's good news for us, because regardless of the occasion or circumstances of our quarrels and fights, the biblical categories always apply. This should give us hope for discerning our hearts and resolving conflict.

How wonderful that these verses were not only written for the original recipients, but for us as well! Here in this passage, God is kindly addressing us with a wealth of wisdom and economy of words—revealing both the root issue of relational conflict and its solution.

In this article we will briefly explore both the root and solution, for they are inseparable. From these few and wise words of James 4:1-2 we learn three things about relational conflict:

Conflict is More Serious Than We Think

Conflict is Simpler to Understand Than We Think

Conflict is Easier to Resolve Than We Think

Conflict is More Serious Than We Think

Take a moment to reflect on your most recent relational conflict. What words and phrases come to mind when you try to identify its cause? Here are some popular ones:

“We just don’t get along.”

“We aren’t wired the same way.”

“Our personalities clash.”

“We have issues.”

It’s our sinful tendency to minimize the seriousness of relational conflict. Often, we have a very flattering assessment of ourselves, and we assume the other participant is primarily to blame. We’re quite comfortable describing conflict with superficial, morally neutral generalities such those listed above.

But James won’t allow it. He won’t allow us to minimize or ignore quarrels or fights. He insists that we examine our quarrels and fights more closely and carefully. As we do, we discover that conflict is more serious than we thought.

Look carefully at the language of this passage. What begins as a “quarrel” at the outset of verse 1 is described as “war within” at the end of verse 1. What begins as a “fight” in verse 1 is described as “murder” and “coveting” in verse 2. The language doesn’t soften as the passage progresses; it strengthens. These verses begin with a human assessment of relational conflict (fights, quarrels) and proceed to a divine evaluation of relational conflict (war, murder, coveting).

When we quarrel and fight, God sees war and murder. What we may see as an “issue” between two individuals, God sees as a violation of his holy law rooted in covetousness and self-exaltation. Quarrels and fights reveal the presence of sin—and not simply sin against another person, but ultimately and most seriously, sin against God. Conflict is far worse than we think.

Do you tend to minimize your relational conflicts? Do you attribute them to something superficial, or entirely to someone else? Or do you seek to evaluate your conflicts from a divine perspective?

When, after years of denial, baseball player Pete Rose finally acknowledged betting on the game while manager of the Cincinnati Reds, his apology was as follows: “I’m sure that I’m supposed to act all sorry or sad or guilty now that I’ve accepted that I’ve done something wrong, but you see, I’m not built that way. So let’s leave it like this. I’m sorry it happened. I’m sorry for all the people, fans, and family it hurt, let’s move on.”

Let's move on. All too often, this can be my approach to resolving relational conflict. There's a degree of sorrow, but it's superficial. And the accent of guilt is on the other individual. As for me, I just want to "move on."

But this passage confronts me: "There's no moving on yet, pal. Where do you think you're going? Come back here, please. Let's have no 'Pete Rose type' confessions among those who profess to love and serve Jesus Christ—but rather confessions that proceed from a genuine awareness of our sin against God."

James 4 can transform how we respond to relational conflict. A divine perspective will keep us from minimizing conflict, help us avoid vague, superficial confessions, and prevent us from prematurely moving on, leaving unresolved conflict in our wake. Through this passage we understand that to engage in quarrels and fights is to sin against a holy God. Conflict is more serious than we think.

Understanding Conflict is Simpler Than We Think

When you are in relational conflict, it often feels complicated, hard to unravel, impossible to resolve. But James insists otherwise. Conflict is not complex, confusing or mysterious. It's not demonic. It doesn't require professional help to understand. It doesn't even ultimately matter how or when it began.

James pinpoints the origin of conflict at the end of verse one: "the passions that are at war within you." Conflict isn't the other person's fault, or the result of unfortunate circumstances—as James reiterates several times: "Your passions are at war within you. You desire and do not have. You covet and cannot obtain."

These three phrases describe not only the location but also the root cause of conflict: the sinful cravings resident in all our hearts. Again, notice the repetitious language: Your passions are at war. You desire and do not have. You covet and cannot obtain. Each and every conflict reveals an inordinately strong desire for something—something we want so much that we're willing to quarrel and fight, to sin against others and dishonor God in order to get. "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" Sinful cravings within our hearts are the root cause of quarrels and fights.

My friend David Powlison, has taught me much about the doctrine of sanctification and the topic of sinful cravings in particular. He observes:

One of the joys of biblical ministry comes when you are able to turn on the lights in another person's dark room....I have yet to meet a couple locked in hostility (and the accompanying fear, self-pity, hurt, self-righteousness) who really understood and reckoned with their motives. James 4:1-3 teaches that cravings underlie conflicts. Why do you fight? It's not "because my wife/husband..."—it's because of something about you. Couples who see what rules them—cravings for affection, attention, power, vindication, control, comfort, a hassle-free life—can repent and find God's grace made real to them, and then learn how to make peace. (Seeing With New Eyes, p 151)

"Cravings underlie conflicts" is an excellent summation of the wisdom found in James 4. Why do we fight? Because we don't get what we want. It's that simple. Wherever there's a conflict—whether it's between two people or two countries—there's a sinful craving that hasn't been satisfied yet. There's no deeper reason.

Take James 4 with you into your next conflict, and you will be able to identify the source of the problem. Ask yourself, "What do I want that I am not getting right now?" The answer will help you recognize the specific sinful craving that is fueling your quarrels and fights.

Despite the unflattering nature of this discovery, we can be grateful for the clarity and specificity of God's Word. In his kindness, he has provided us with precise and practical wisdom for understanding our hearts in the midst of relational conflict.

By contrast, we often live in a world of unhelpful generalities. For example, you're driving along and a light appears on the dashboard: "Check Engine." That's all it says. What are you supposed to make of that? The first time it happened to me, I dutifully complied. I pulled over, opened the hood, and stood in front of the engine, thinking, "Wow, there's a lot of stuff in here." But there were no blinking lights, no tiny flags waving, nothing at all to tell me what exactly I should be checking. Within moments I had determined beyond any doubt that the level of the windshield wiper fluid was just fine. Having exhausted my checking abilities, I got back in the car and continued on my way, clinging to the vague hope that such checking had been sufficient. **[Great illustration]**

My computer is another example. One day I'm typing. It's a simple document, and I'm just naïve enough to think that basic word processing is something my computer was made to handle. Suddenly a message pops up: "Error has occurred." The message itself seems to carry an attitude. I can almost hear a mocking voice from deep within my computer: "Ha ha, ha! An error has occurred. This document is dead. Your computer is dead. You're dead. It's an ERROR!" If you were nearby, you might have heard me talking back to my computer (don't tell me you never have...), as I commented on the overall unhelpfulness of this message.

"OK, an error. So I should...what? Save the document? Not save it? Print it out? Copy it all by hand? Reboot the machine? Back up my hard drive? Purchase an entire IT department?" In the end, I employed the most sophisticated technical solution of which I am capable: Ctrl-Alt-Del.

I am so glad that when it comes to relational conflict, God doesn't provide mere generalities. He gives us so much more information than, "Sin has occurred" and "It's worse than you think." Now that is accurate and even quite valuable, but it doesn't suggest a solution any more than does "Check Engine" or "Error has occurred." No, God provided James 4:1-2 so that we can identify and confess our specific cravings, receive forgiveness, and begin to weaken our cravings and cultivate righteousness.

Douglas Moo, in his commentary on the letter from James, writes the following:

"With penetrating insight...James provides us with a powerful analysis of human conflict. Verbal argument, private violence or national conflict—the cause of them all can be traced back to the frustrated desire to want more than we have, to be envious of and covet what others have, whether it be their position or their possessions" (The Letter of James, p. 184).

This passage offers hope. Our lives need not be an endless, inevitable cycle of unresolved quarrels and fights. Instead, God provides insight and discernment so that we can put to death the sinful craving at the root of every relational conflict.

The truth that "cravings underlie conflicts" was vividly displayed in my own life, when I arrived home one evening from work. My family was gathering for dinner, and hugs and kisses and "I love yous" were given all around. Carolyn walked by me on her way to the table with some food and kindly mentioned in passing that I had failed to tell her about a calendar commitment I made for both of us.

There was nothing sinful, either in her words or tone, but my response was immediate: "I did tell you about it." Walking past me back into the kitchen, she said, with a smile, "I don't think so." Still civil, but a bit more firmly, I insisted that I had indeed informed her of this commitment.

After dinner, when Carolyn and I were alone, she humbly appealed: "Lately, I feel as if you have not been keeping me informed of various plans like you usually do."

I wish I could tell you that I responded with humility. I wish I had heard her out and then humbly evaluated her critique, appropriately suspicious of my own heart and eager to learn from her observations. But I did not. Instead I began to question her, and rather quickly my approach came to resemble that of a prosecuting attorney. I was being misrepresented and this injustice must be righted.

Carolyn was merely trying to preserve intimacy and communication in our marriage, but in my pride I quickly became angry. Before long I had moved beyond disagreement and (since no one else was honoring

me) begun to honor myself. I actually said something like, “Dear, it’s tough not to admire how effective a communicator I have been in our marriage.” I followed this up with *A Brief History of Our Marriage According to C.J.*, featuring a number of illustrations portraying me as possibly the most communicative husband of all time. And although she expressed appreciation for what I had done in the past, Carolyn was not persuaded.

My arrogance was pronounced and my anger was escalating; but Carolyn chose to serve and not sin. In my prideful state, that was simply unacceptable. So to my shame, I made several remarks intended to provoke her to join my sinful party. I wanted her to have something to confess as well. But Carolyn wasn’t playing my game, and we ended the conversation in disagreement.

Did I then go to another room, fall to my knees, open my Bible to James 4, and repent? No, I went to our bedroom, sat down, opened my new *Sports Illustrated*, and dove in. But I wasn’t reading the articles. I was imagining my wife coming into the room and saying, “Love, you really are most incredible husband in all of world history. How could I have possibly criticized you in any way? Will you please forgive me?”

That’s when God, in his kindness, began to convict me. I began to see that I had brought cravings right in the front door with me that evening—cravings for my home to be primarily (if not exclusively) a place of refuge and relaxation, rather than a context in which to serve. I wanted a hassle-free evening. I wanted to be lavished with attention, affection and approval. And I’d received correction instead.

My passions were warring within me, and when they weren’t satisfied, what did I do? Because I coveted and could not obtain, I fought and quarreled. Because I desired and did not have, I sought to drag my patient, loving wife into the mire with me. In the final analysis, I was railing against God and his purposes in my life for that evening.

When the Holy Spirit clarified my sinful cravings, I saw not only that the situation was more serious than I had thought—I saw where the source and cause of this conflict truly resided. It wasn’t complicated. The problem was within me!

Understanding conflict is simpler than we think, for God’s Word makes it clear that cravings underlie conflicts.

Resolving Conflict is Easier Than We Think

Whatever the nature of your next conflict, it’s also easier to resolve than you think.

No matter its duration, intensity, severity, or subject matter, the solution is found in James 4:10: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” This non-negotiable divine command is accompanied by a promise.

How can we humble ourselves before God?

We find the motivation right here in this passage. James 4:1-2 reminds us that relational conflict is first and foremost conflict with God. When I quarrel and fight, I have a more serious opponent than my spouse, or any one else. In James 4:6 God reveals himself as actively opposed to the proud. When I’m in conflict, God is opposed to me.

My sin against God must first be resolved before there’s any hope of reconciliation with others. I must confess my sinful cravings to him—clearly, specifically, and without excuse. I must repent and turn away from quarrels and fights.

When I genuinely repent, there is sweet hope in the promise that: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9.) When we humble ourselves before the Lord, he will forgive, and he will exalt us.

But in light of the seriousness of my sin against God, how can forgiveness be so easy? There's just one answer. It can only be this easy because the Savior has done the unimaginably difficult.

On the cross, the Son of God resolved the most serious conflict: the conflict between a holy God and wicked sinners. It has been settled, completely and forever, through the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The ultimate relational conflict has been totally resolved. Our sin is worse than we think, but God's grace is greater than our sin.

Because that infinitely serious conflict with God has been resolved, there is hope for resolving every human relational conflict. When we have humbled ourselves before God through repentance, we are then equipped by grace to seek interpersonal resolution. With our sins against God forgiven, we can begin to find reconciliation with others.

When you have contributed sinfully to a conflict, return to that individual with a confession that is sincere, specific, and—in most cases—brief. Just as specific confession is vital when repenting before God, it is also important to identify specific sinful cravings when confessing to others. We must also guard against a lengthy confession, which can sometimes be a front to excuse sin instead of requesting forgiveness. Only when your confession is sincere and specific will you be able to help your wife, child, friend, church member, or fellow employee.

Resolving relational conflict is easier than you think. It involves humbling ourselves before the Lord, and where appropriate, humbling ourselves before others.

I did finally pull my head out of my Sports Illustrated that evening. Convicted by God's merciful illumination of my sinful heart, I humbled myself before him, repented specifically, and received forgiveness. I was then able to return to Carolyn with a very specific confession about the cravings that had caused the quarrel. She forgave me quickly, graciously, and completely. Once again, I experienced the sweet fruit of peace with God and the person I love most in all the world.

Friends, there is a relational conflict in your immediate future, just as there is in mine. Let's prepare now for this temptation and purpose to apply the wisdom of James 4:1-2 in the midst of quarrels and fights. For conflict is more serious than we think, it's simpler to understand than we think, and because of the Savior, it's easier to resolve than we think.