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James 4:1-3 "The Source of Strife" February 16, 2020

All right. Let's open our Bibles this morning to James Chapter 4 verse 1.

James is the first New Testament book that was in circulation maybe a dozen years or so after the resurrection of Jesus and His ascension. It was written specifically to Jewish believers, who had been chased out of Jerusalem with the intense persecution from the religious folks that had come against the church after Stephen was stoned to death. James' interest was that their faith, which now had to be lived in the world and away from the body gathering, would be real; that it would be visible; it would translate into behavior, Jesus would be seen in them.

As such, James was kind of a tough guy. Goes after heart conditions. Before he talks about behavior, he always talks about the heart. Chapter 1 he talked about trials from God's perspective. How do you view the things that God allows you to go through when you factor into the fact that God is good, He's for you, and He does good all the time? He questioned our hearing versus our doing of His word. Not deceiving ourselves. Even said, you know, even if do you what God says, why do you do it? What's your heart like as you love the Lord?

Chapter 2 he talked about the sin of partiality, or prejudice. He said you shouldn't find that in the life of a believer. God's not like that; why should you be? And then he gave us a long study on saving faith, and how it has to produce works because God's presence in your life cannot be hidden. So faith saves, but works prove that salvation.

In Chapter 3 James then turned to the mouth, to our words, and said that the tongue was small, but it is the most dangerous and most untamed part of our body. That a life not surrendered to the Lord can destroy and set great things ablaze with our mouths. And yet, victory is available to the Christian. And again, James goes after

those things that ought to be different because we know the Lord.

He ended Chapter 3 talking to us about the difference between wisdom from above, wisdom from below. But he said you can always tell where it comes from you by how that knowledge that's acquired is used. The wisdom from below always presents itself as bitter envy and self-seeking. It is earthly and sensual and demonic. The word from above, the wisdom from God, is peaceable and pure and gentle, and verse 17 there's a whole list of things that we looked at. And he ended up by saying that the fruits of righteousness were sown by those who seek peace.

This morning, and really for the next few weeks down through verse 12, James will mix those two subjects together: The things that we say and then wisdom. Where does the wisdom come from? And then how do we translate that into what we say? Because God wants to not only save you, He wants to save your mouth. He wants to use you to witness to others, and saved mouths come from saved lives.

This morning, just three verses. James wants to talk to us about what the source of our strife among us is. And he says this in verse 1: "Where do wars and fighting come from among you?"

Why is it that people like to fight? Are we just scrappy people? The first recorded fight in the Bible follows the chapter on sin. Man separates himself from God, one chapter later Cain and Abel are at it and it leads to murder. And if you chart history, even biblical history, it is filled with just a history of fighting. You've probably never read of the War of the Whiskers, or of Jenkins' Ear, or of the Oaken Bucket. It led a lot of people to their deaths. You can find it in the history books. But wars are a fact of life, and they have been a fact of life since the fall of man, and continue despite the mutual agreements and treaties and pacts and resolutions and signatures that we have made.

I think we are aware of how cruel men can be. I think sometimes you hear these horrendous, you know, flagrant mistreatments of others and you just shake your head. How zealous people can be in their hatred. People's lives oftentimes in constant jeopardy because of man's

sin. And we can't stop it. We don't know how to stop it. before it is a war among nations, it is a war among people. It is a war of words. It is a war of the mind. Oh, well, gas wars, Star Wars -- it's a war always somewhere. And it is the natural man separated from God who can honestly be called a man of war. And sin and the enemy and the world will certainly seek to escalate and continue that horrible equation.

But James takes this inevitability of sin and he brings it home to the church, because he says here in verse 1, "Where does this fighting and war come from among you?" He's not writing to the world. Go back to Chapter 1, he's writing to the believers, to the saints. Like every other topic that James has covered so far, he wants to drag us along to that place where a new life in Christ should make a difference; where our relationship with God should show itself in this area. And here's the ideal, and the reality, and then his question.

According to verse 18, godly people sow peace, fruits of righteousness come forth, but that isn't always the case. There are a lot of wars in the church, where there's no peace and no peacemakers. They could do better. God has assured us of that by giving us His Spirit. We have a new heart. James just wants them to do that for themselves, for the witness to the world.

I think one of the problems that we have is that as believers we live in a world that knows nothing of God, and so we are subject to enormous kind of worldly pressures, and we can model behavior. We're used to the world fighting and pushing and shoving. We trust no one. We don't spend enough time in fellowship, in spiritual encouragement, feeding our spirits, and so worldly pressures settle in. You know, and then we carry that along into the church, into the pew. Spiritual growth is stunted, we compromise God's standards, we ignore His word, we cloud our outlooks, and the fight with the old man begins, and it just continues. We need good atmospheres to grow in spiritually, because outside the doors there's a conflict that's real. James is concerned that it shouldn't be inside the doors.

Those same fleshly battles that engender war in the world really shouldn't be in the church so much. We're new creatures in Christ now. God would help us to avoid this kind of sin.

Whatever happened to "behold, how good and how pleasant it is for the brethren to dwell together"? It's in the Bible, must be so. Whatever happened to that? The ideal stands in stark contrast to the unfortunate reality.

Lot comes to quarrel with Abraham, who shows tremendous wisdom there in Genesis Chapter 13, seeks to make peace, but even then the workers for them are fighting and it isn't really resolved. Strife and division take place. Absalom fights with his father David. He feels he has a good cause, and he might very well have had one, but the end result was Absalom dies and a father's heart was broken. Read through the gospels and you find a repeating theme. Apostles chosen to be God's intimate, you know, first Bible class, fighting amongst themselves right up until the last supper in whispered tones about who could be the greatest; James and John even involving their mom to come vouch for them to Jesus. The result: everyone was mad at them, or mad at their mom for not showing up for them.

Division, wars amongst the saints, it's a problem in the church, and James would like to see us delivered from it. The marquee shouldn't say come on in and worship and fight, and pray and fight, and worship and pray and fight some more, yet it's been a problem since the -- man has fallen.

Take I Corinthians -- just go to one book in the Bible. The church had a tremendously difficult time getting along. Early on in Chapter 1 of I Corinthians Paul said, There's fighting and there's division, and there's side taking, and there's unspiritual pride. And look at you, you're the witness? He said to them in Chapter 3, Everything you have, God's given you, so what are you bragging about? Told them in Chapter 4, You think there there's a judgment to be made, let God make it. Told them in Chapter 6, "What are you doing suing each other before unbelievers, just to get your way? Talked to them in Chapter 8 about stumbling, and striving, and unwillingness just to limit your own liberty in Christ for the sake of the weaker among you that are stumbling because of your example. Wrote to them in Chapter 11 about the Lord's supper, that the gluttony and the self-interest that were brought to these love feasts had actually led the Lord to bring judgment. Some were sick, some had died, all because they were serving themselves.

In Chapter 12 and 13 and 14 of I Corinthians the big argument was who has the greatest gifts, and how come I have more than you? And they were told that these were gifts God gave to serve others, not for your own glory. Use them in love. That's just one epistle. There's a bunch of them in the New Testament, and they all cover the same ground.

Mythology told us that Hercules beat an animal with his sword, and every time he hit the animal, it grew double in size. Remember, mythology, not the Bible. Pallas, his counselor, said to Hercules, "You can't kill that thing that way." And Hercules said, "What is that?" He said, "That's strife. Every time you try to beat it by fighting with it, it'll grow. Just leave it alone until it shrinks away."

Every New Testament book speaks to us about this battle. There's an old nature, there's an old man, there's that person that you were, dominated by sin, unable to get free; and then there's the new man, the new one, the new heart and the new spirit, born again, created in Christ's image, able now with His help to overcome the flesh. But the battle is real. And we're told constantly to put on the new man. Evidence the Spirit and the wisdom of God. It is characterized by selflessness, and it replaces selfishness and sin.

Paul wrote in Chapter 4 to the Ephesians, "Put off, concerning your conduct formerly, the old man which is corrupt according to its deceptive lusts. Be renewed in the spirit of your mind. Put on the new man created according to God, in righteousness and holiness. Put away lying. 'Every one of you should speak the truth to his neighbor,' we're members one of another. 'Be angry, but don't sin': Don't let the sin go down on your wrath, don't give any place to the devil. If you were stealing, steal no more. Labor, work with your hands to do that which is good, that you may have something to give to those that are in need. Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, only that which is good to edify, that it can impart grace to the hearers. Don't grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by which you were sealed unto the day of redemption. Put away all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, evil speaking from among you, with all malice. Be kindhearted, one to another, be tenderhearted, forgive one another, even as God in Christ has forgiven you." Church ought to be different than the

world. We're delivered from the flesh and what naturally happens in the world: Fighting and war and self.

Paul writing to his favorite church -- and his favorite church is definitely the Philippian church. He didn't spend much time with them, but man, did they do well. In fact, if you read the book of Philippians, you will find a letter that is absolutely filled with commendations, and the only negative thing in the whole book is in Chapter 4, the first few verses, where he goes after two women in this church who are fighting. And they're fighting so loudly and so vociferously, they've actually gathered two groups together in the church, and they're taking sides. And the whole church is being kind of moved by these two battling women. And Paul told them to knock it off. Besides that, the letter is filled with a song of joy over the maturity of God's people.

If it wasn't such a problem, this battle with our flesh, I don't think the Lord would mention it so much, but you find it in every place; that the unity of the Christians and the heavenly wisdom that would show in those that pursue peace is really what God is looking for.

When Isaiah wrote in Chapter 11 about the effect of God's relationship with His people, he said there in Chapter 11, "The envy of Ephraim will depart, and the adversaries of Judah will be cut off; and Ephraim won't be envious of Judah anymore, and Judah won't harass Ephraim any longer." There'll be peace. When God rules, there's peace.

Jeremiah wrote in Chapter 50, "In those days, at that time, the children of Israel will come, and the children of Judah will come and they'll sit together and seek the Lord." That's what God wants to do in the church. I get it, you walking outside, you're running -- there's a battleground, but it shouldn't be here. "Why are there fighting and wars among you?" That's his question. Why is it still found in the church? You can't open the Bible without finding these exhortations to put on the new man, to walk in the Spirit, to follow Jesus, to die to yourself, to love one another, to forgive, to put others before yourself. Go outline the New Testament, just sometimes, pick a subject. You'll find hundreds and hundreds of verses just on that one issue.

James in five little chapters covers class wars, the

power struggling, selfish ambition and personal battles, while the weapon of choice to inflict pain is the tongue, and the wisdom behind it comes from the pit of hell. That was life before Jesus, not now. Why is that part of our lives now?

The word "war" here is the word for quarrels, literally. Disagreements. The word for fights is a much smaller word: Skirmishes, conflicts, personal battles. But James' point is what you find in the world comes from the flesh and from the enemy. It should not be found among you.

When Jesus was headed across the Kidron towards the time of his arrest at the garden, He stopped to pray. You can find his prayer in John Chapter 17. And he prayed for a lot of things: For the church and those who would follow the believing of what the disciples would be preaching as time went on, and then that next generation. But His prayer was, "Father, I pray that they might be one, even as We are one. That Father, as You are in me and I am in You, that they may be one in Us; that the world may believe that You've sent me." He would go on to say in Chapter 11, "By this love should all men know that you're My disciples." You see, the difference in the world and the church in this regard, this flesh and what it produces of war and fighting and self is so stark that the Lord uses it if that part of your life gets surrendered and you begin to do things in the way that the Lord would want, your life will be such a witness, it'll stand in such contrast, no one will miss it. They'll be able to see it clearly. These folks are different than the world. God has done a work in them. The greatest outward witness of his internal work.

So this question, where do these things come from among you? And you might want to say, well, the society has a problem, or we have bad leadership, or there's a few bad apples that spoil the whole barrel. But it's more than simply a bad situation. It's the battle between the old and the new nature. And if you want the answer to where does this come from, James is not going to let you down. I know you want to say, it comes from Satan, or false brethren, or the heretic who has crept in unaware, but James says this: You're to blame. "Where does it come from among you?" Verse 1, "Do they not come from your desire for pleasure that wars in your members?" The root cause of fighting and war, even in the church, is the

desire for the old things in life, and not a desire for the things of God. The root desire for your battle with your friends and neighbors and family and spouses and acquaintances is found in your old nature.

Paul writing to the Galatians in Chapter 5 said, "Look, you've been given liberty; but don't use it as an occasion for your flesh. Instead in that liberty, use that to love one another and serve one another, because the law is best fulfilled in this one word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you bite and you devour one another, be careful lest you don't become consumed one of another! I say: Walk in the Spirit, you won't fulfill the lust of the flesh. Because the flesh will lust against your Spirit, the Spirit against the flesh; they're contrary, so that you're not able to do the things you want. But if you're led of the Spirit, you're not under the law."

You see, everything comes down to this: Are you surrendering to the Lord and allowing His Spirit to give you strength to overcome the flesh, or are you falling back to the old way of life? And James' contention is, fighting and division in the church are caused by those that are walking in the flesh. Your flesh knows nothing about grace, knows nothing about forgiveness, knows nothing about esteeming others better than yourself, knows nothing about the first being last, or how dying to yourself brings life. But as believers, the Holy Spirit is within you. He wants to give you His power. His presence can change you. Paul wrote in Philippians, favorite book, favorite church, Chapter 2 verse 13, "It is He who works in you both to will and then to do His good pleasure."

To allow my passions to flourish, to be driven by the flesh and not be surrendered to the Lord, is a dangerous place to be. It's a battle that then I lose every time. The essence of sin, selfishness. That's what I want. In fact, the word for pleasure here is the English word "hedonism." It means to love and hunger after pleasure for yourself. Why did Eve eat of the fruit in the garden? Because she had been told, "Eat of this and you'll be as wise as God." Why did Abraham lie about his wife? He wanted to spare his own neck. Why did Achan, you know, steal that loot that the Lord said selfishly he should not have taken? It caused the defeat of Israel. He was moved by self, and it caused sin. When Isaiah



wrote, "All we like sheep have gone astray," that's a comma, and then it says "We have turned, every one, to our own way."

This is why I don't like reading James. I love the Psalms; especially the last 50 Psalms. They're all about blessing.

Where does it come from among you? Because in the church unfortunately, the source is the same. It's our flesh, it's our old nature. But in the church, we are able to somehow hide our flesh and our sin and cloak it in some kind of religious terms, in a religious garb. If you remember early on in the Bible, there is that discussion that Moses had with his sister, Miriam, and Aaron. They came to him saying, "We are concerned about your wife. We think maybe you're taking on too much. Maybe you should take care of your home life." Read a little further and you find out they were just very jealous that he was in charge. They wanted to rule as he did. They wanted more power. They envied his position.

We just mentioned James and John bringing their mom to Jesus to secure a place for them right next to Jesus. What you won't read in that account is that mom said of her sons, "Oh, Jesus, they just want to sit by you because they love to be with you." That wasn't the issue at all. They were there to get power, to be seen, to have a special place, a seat that would give them authority.

Miriam and Aaron were dealt with by the Lord, and the progress of the people through the wilderness was interrupted for a week. They couldn't move at all, and many suffered as a result. James and John were rebuked and looked at with great disdain. Achan lost his life, and so did his family. Paul stopped growth, stopped progress, brought suffering to themselves and others. Yet there the sin was cloaked in spiritual desire for supposed godly gain, for good things.

Why are these things happening with you? And the answer is, because you're living in the flesh. Verse 2, "You lust, you don't have. You murder and covet, but you cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. And when you ask you don't receive, because you're asking amiss, that you might consume it on your own hedonism." Desire for self.

James paints this horrible picture of how selfish desires without restraint never satisfy, but continue constantly to the war found amongst God's people. The lusts are part of the old man. I want, I want, I want. I continue to want, and I want some more. Consumed by the wants of the flesh, contrary to God's plan, they dominate your life. They leave you miserable, needy, and out of touch. They're not obtainable. They'll never satisfy. We should believe that to be so.

Years ago, it was a reporter who asked the Rockefellers, one of the richest folks on the planet at the time, "How many more millions do you need to be happy?" And he said, "Just one more." I think you can relate to that.

And how far will we go if our flesh is in charge? You lust, but you can't get what you want. You'll even murder and covet, and you still can't obtain.

James is always in his very understated way, with very powerful language, said, look -- whether it's literal or just the hatred that Jesus said is the equivalent, the flesh will go to almost any length to get what it wants. It doesn't have any control. It doesn't have any self-denial. In fact, the word "covet" is the word for boiling, or zealousness. There's nothing that can slow you down. Murder? I can do that. Whatever it takes. Fighting and war, you have not.

And then it says you don't have because you can't ask, and when you ask, you just -- you're praying for stuff that God can't answer. If self sits on the throne, if the Lord's desire is not in your heart, war is the answer, which should tell you that the new birth doesn't automatically kill the old man, which is why we are told daily to reckon it dead, to consider it dead, to agree with God that it doesn't need to be fed or entertained or catered to.

How often I've seen folks even in church who come -- they want to blame other people for their lack of joy, or peace. They'd say things like, oh, if it wasn't for my job, if it wasn't for that husband of mine, those kids. If I could just leave the state. Here's the problem with you trying to leave the state: You got to go with you. If I could just live in Hawaii. Yeah, that's going to be great for Hawaii.

And even when we come to the privilege of spiritual life that we have, being able to seek the Lord, they are reduced to no value, because now you are driven there by your great fleshly desires mired in the old life. When the heart is off, everything's off. And these fleshly things will carry in my spiritual activities. Prayers that should be a time to seek the Lord's will now are direction prayers where God needs to in Heaven satisfy my will. "Where your treasure is," Jesus said, "that's where you'll find your heart." And even when you pray, it's disastrous, because God can't answer a prayer like that. Well, Lord, please give me a Porsche, so I can take people to church, one at a time. If you want to do that, I hope you get a big van.

God sees behind the posture of the body, the quiver in the voice, the tear in the eye. He knows what you're up to. In fact, the word "ask" in verse 3 is there twice, and both of them are in the middle voice, which means to ask for one's self. The subject is you. Pleasure-seeking prayers instead of God-seeking prayers.

Selfish living, fleshly living, not surrendering to the Spirit, bring fighting and war into the church, unanswered prayer. We've been saved. The flesh no longer has the power to lord over us. We read that this morning in 18 verses in Chapter 6 of Romans. But warring is the indicator that your heart is stuck in the old life, not growing in the new. And God has better things for us. People at war are never happy. There're always casualties. Their greatest casualty is themselves. They end up with no ability to serve, or to receive, or to love, or to share.

If God has your way and your life, you can be free from it, and joy can come, and peace can come, and the world can see the church is different. Watch the way the world works. You know how that works. Don't take it on.

Verse 4 begins with the words "adulterers and adulteresses," so I'm going to leave that for next week.