



TROUBLE, TROUBLE EVERYWHERE
James 4:1-12

Conflict, like death and taxes, is unavoidable. Nations rage, neighbors feud, siblings strive, lovers quarrel and – unfortunately – churches fight. One zigs – the other zags.¹ Life is full of conflict. Trouble – trouble – everywhere.

Today we continue in our journey through the epistle of James. There is a reason that James has taught us to tame the tongue. There is a reason James has taught us how to handle temptation. There is a reason James has taught us to seek wisdom from above. All of these important insights hit home in **chapter 4**. Here we see the results of a faith community that uses its tongues and wisdom for all the wrong reasons and motives. Dr. James of Jerusalem once again identifies the symptoms and offers his diagnosis – and then writes his prescription to achieve the goal of a healthy body of believers.

Unity is so important to the body of Christ that the New Testament devotes more attention to it than either heaven or hell.² Eugene Peterson reminds us that “The perfect model for community and unity is the God-head: Father – Son – Holy Spirit. When we are baptized – we are baptized into the communal life of the Trinity.”³

Just to show you how up-to-date James is in this instruction manual – I have in my library a book entitled, **COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN CHURCHES AND CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATIONS** (The Brodman Press, 1992). The book thesis is that in the modern era - one of the greatest threats to the Christian community is the inability of people to work creatively and in harmony with one another.

James demonstrates that this was a threat 2000 years ago. Fred B. Craddock teaches we are more alike than different from the people in the pages of scripture.

It seems that the conflict is found in every generation. It has been felt in everyday life and relationships. You and I know it as the “He said/She said” syndrome. It will hit every family and church house.

Yes, James is concerned that our inner desires are adversely affecting the outward journey of the believer and thus rendering the church’s witness powerless. James knew he had to deal with the rage in the human heart. Often when we think of the word rage we think of the winds, the oceans, waves, water – much like the hurricane’s whirl that is now forming out in the Atlantic – but James knew the greatest

threat to the church was not the weather – but the weapon of the human heart controlled by sin. So without further chit-chat let us dig in today.

James primarily identifies two wars or conflicts that cause trouble in the church. First we are at war with each other – and second at war with God. You could easily switch their positions and still have the same results. They are deeply interrelated.

LET US LOOK QUICKLY AT VERSE ONE.

Here James addresses the age-old problem of fussing and fighting among God' covenant people. James is writing to a real church – a real group of people – not a mythological one. It seems that a certain group of people were having a terrible time agreeing on anything – except that the other was wrong – dead wrong.

It reminds me of a dear lady named Mrs. McRuffie who lived in Kentucky and attended a Baptist Church there. It seems that she always found something to criticize about the pastor and the church. The pastor – trying to fulfill the truth of our lesson today – went to see Mrs. McRuffie at her home. He rang the bell – and even knocked loudly on the door. He knew she was home. He felt as though he was being observed. So he knelt down on his knees – and peeked into the keyhole. Lo and behold – he found himself staring right into the eye of Mrs. McRuffie! He shouted out, “Mrs. McRuffie! Today a miracle has happened! You and the pastor for the first time – are seeing eye to eye!” She got up – walked out the back door – and never came to church again.

Notice James shares “What causes fights and quarrels among you?” The sin is not in somebody else's church – but your church. I know today many people in the church believe in the Bible generally – but when the shoe fits their feet – they do not want to wear it. James is reminding them that these characteristics of fighting, envy, and quarreling were a poor reflection of the character they were supposed to have because of their relationship to Jesus Christ. As Calvin Miller shares, “It is always much more difficult to sing when the audience has turned its back.”

The writer Robert A. Raines, once shared these insightful words that describe what James is writing about:

**“I am like James and John, Lord.
Lord, I size up other people
in terms of what they can do for me,
how they can further my program,
feed my ego,
satisfy my needs,
give me strategic advantage.
I exploit people,
ostensibly for your sake,
but really for my own sake.**

**Lord, I turn to you
to get the inside track
and obtain special favors,
your direction for my schemes,
your power for my projects,
your sanction for my ambitions,
your blank check for whatever I want.
I am like James and John.
Change me, Lord.
Make me a man who asks of you and of others,
What can I do for you?”⁴**

Also, notice the strong military type language and imagery James uses. He wanted them to know that the destruction was just as real in the church as on any battlefield – that their words unfittingly spoken caused great damage and destruction just as a sword or bullet.

To make matters worse, this war they could not blame on a pagan army – but on a puffed up ego and a poison tongue. It was their selfish passion and pursuits. This should not be in the Christian community. When you deal with conflict you must somehow stop this vicious cycle – and replace it with something greater. James knew he must expose the passions of jealousy, materialism, and covetousness – and replace it with a God-focused perspective. This is why Paul also taught in the famous love chapter that love is not self-seeking, arrogant, or rude.

There is a legend that tells how one day the Carpenter’s tools had a conference. Brother Hammer was in the chair. The meeting had informed him that he must leave because he was too noisy. He said, “If I am to leave this shop – Brother Gimlet must go too; he is so insignificant that he can only make a small impression.”

Little Brother Gimlet arose and said, “All right, but Brother Screw must go also. You have to turn him around and around to get him anywhere.”

Brother Screw then said, “If you wish, I will go, but Brother Plane must leave also; all his work is on the surface. There is no depth to it.”

Brother Plane replied, “Well, Brother Rule will have to withdraw if I do, for he is always measuring other folks as though he were the only one who is right.”

Brother Rule then complained against Brother Sandpaper and said, “I just don’t care, for he is rougher than he ought to be. He is always rubbing people the wrong way.”

In the midst of all this discussion, the Carpenter of Nazareth walked in. He had come to do His day’s work. He put on his apron, and went to the bench to make a pulpit. He employed the screw, the gimlet, the sandpaper, the saw, the hammer, the

plane, and all the other tools. After the day's work was over and the pulpit was finished, Brother Saw arose and said, "Brethren, I perceive that all of us are laborers together with God."⁵

I am further reminded of the story of a small lad who was being harassed by the class bully. One day in class, the conflict came to a boiling point. The small lad took a twig and drew a line in the dirt on the playground and declared, "I double-dare you to cross that line." The bully boldly stepped across the line. "Okay" said the small lad, "**now you are on my team.**" That is the creative spirit we need to solve some of the thorny issues of our time.

Yes, James must remind them that the Royal Law – not Murphy's Law – held them together as a faith community. They were all important to God – and for the work of the kingdom. They were to fight the devil, not each other. There is a right fight – and a wrong fight. A church body that is spending more time fighting – rather than building each other up is a church out of focus. Like a broken camera – its picture is out of focus. Like R. C. Sproul taught us last week, "We need to discover the true identity of God." This keeps a church in focus.

During the month of August in our combined Adult Classes we asked our missionary friend Paul Browne to lead us in developing "**An Ephesians 4 Church.**" As believers our identity is in Christ. As believers we share "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." A member of our church family believes **verse 16 of chapter 4** is the key, "From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." This truth prevents disunity from taking root in any form.

However, let me share – God desires unity – not uniformity in the body of Christ. Remember how different and unique the 12 disciples were? It was God who designed them with different personalities, gifts, and graces. God designs those differences to fulfill the great work he has for us to do.

Our children, Jennifer and John, are as different as night and day. Sometimes they would drive me so crazy I would tell the guidance counselor at school they were Mary's children from her first husband. However, it is a nice touch when I see them getting along together as they grow in years. The same principle applies in God's family. Rick Warren reminds us that more Christians are hurt by other Christians than are hurt by pagans or non-believers.

Jesus experienced his harshest criticism from religious people and those in charge of the system. However, never once did he ever boycott the Temple or synagogue – or divorce himself from it.

A church family lives in a covenant relationship. Covenants are not easy. Being a Christian is not easy. Being married is not always easy. Church life and church community life is not built on convenience – but on convictions.

Suppose you could gather Martin Luther, Charles Wesley, Mother Theresa, Billy Graham, Charles Stanley, Eugene Peterson, James Boice, C. S. Lewis, Philip Yancey, St. Augustine, and Max Lucado all in one room at the same time. They would not agree fully on issues such as baptism, Holy Communion, or church government – but there would be a deep fellowship and common commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. They would focus in on the majors that unite them rather than dwell on the minor distinctions that would divide them. This spirit must prevail in the 21st century if the church is to fulfill and reach its greatest potential.

Despite all of its imperfections – the church will outlive and outlast every human empire and kingdom. Jesus said, “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” There are no loopholes to avoid the church. I know what James is asking is challenging – however, if the church is Christ’s bride – it is worth our efforts – and putting our hands to the plow and not looking back. Trouble – trouble everywhere. However, so is God’s grace everywhere. Let us focus on that.

May God give us the wisdom and courage so to do.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz, September 2, 2007
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ENDNOTES

¹ Thanks to Dave Roper for this material.

² Rick Warren, **THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN LIFE**, Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, page 160.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, **CHRIST PLAYS IN TEN THOUSAND PLACES**, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, Colorado Springs, CO, 2005, pages 304-05.

⁴ Robert A. Raines, **CREATIVE BROODING**, The Macmillan Company, New York, New York, 1968, 6th printing, pages 94-95.

⁵ John Ed Mathison, **“The Frazer Messenger, Pastor’s Column,”** Montgomery, Alabama.