

HOW TO AVOID ARGUMENTS

One of the joys of having traveled to many places is that you hear so many different accents. You recognize that a normal Canadian accent is very different to someone from the Southern US, or from England, or from Australia, or from the Caribbean. When we were on the Doulos we made friends with a couple called the Yorks. He was from the southern US and she was originally from England. Because they had lived in the US for many years, Lorraine had a deep southern accent. After the ship they went on to be missionaries in the UK. When we met them again years later, she had gone back to her very British accent. I asked her how long it had taken for her accent to change and she said “what change.” She had not even noticed the difference.

Isn't it true that most of us think that the only person in the world that doesn't have an accent is us? That somehow, we are normal and everyone else around us is weird? The reality is that we have picked up our own accent from the world around us. The same is true of sin. Without knowing it we often pick up the values from the fallen world around us.

Today we are continuing in our series on the book of James and we come to the fourth chapter;

James 4:1-10 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? 2 You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. 3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. 4 You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. 5 Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? 6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." 7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

As a pastor I talk to people all the time who are struggling with conflict in their home or workplace. People who just always seem to always be fighting with their spouse or kids or workmates. People who are good friends or who love each other and yet always seem to blow up over minor issues. Parents who, no matter what they try, have constant tension with their children. That is the issue that James is trying to address here. In speaking about how to avoid arguments he gives us both the causes and the cure -- the reasons and the remedy to arguments. James starts by saying this;

James 4:1 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

James says that the cause of arguments is conflicting desires. When my wants conflict with your wants then sparks are going to fly. This makes sense when we remember that anger is usually caused by unmet expectations. Frustrated feelings causes fights.

Conflict starts early in life, even before you can talk. Have you noticed that a baby, if his needs are not instantly gratified, lets you know? You can argue even if you don't know how to talk.

Arguments develop with others when we have conflicting desires. What is it that we desire?

POSSESSIONS

James 4:2a You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight...

God created things to be used and to enjoy. We use things and love people. Problems start when we get that backwards, when we start loving things and using people. When we begin manipulating others, controlling them and moving them around to get what you want because things have become more important in your life than people.

The desire to have is probably the single greatest source of conflict. The single greatest reason that people get divorced today is not interpersonal problems or marital unfaithfulness, but money problems. It is when things become a battleground. It is when possessions have greater importance than people.

PLEASURE

James 4:3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

It's not wrong to enjoy life. But when pleasure becomes the number one goal in your life -- if it feels good, do it -- you're asking for conflict. When my wants take the place over what is needed, then we're in trouble. When you are more interested in your own comfort than in the comfort of others around you then there is bound to be conflict.

Some years ago, Pastor Donald Barnhouse was counseling a young woman on the sidewalk in front of a church following an evening service. She said she was a Christian and that she wanted to follow Christ. But she wanted to be famous, too. She wanted to pursue a stage career in New York. "After I have made it in the theater, then I'll follow Christ completely," she said. Barnhouse took a key out of his pocket and scratched a mark on a postal box standing on the corner. "That is what God will let you do," he said. "God will let you scratch the surface of true success. He will let you get close enough to the top to know what it is, but He will never let you have it, because He will never let one of His children replace Him with anything but Himself."

Years later he met that girl again, and she confessed that this had indeed been her life story. She had dabbled in the stage. Her picture had been in a national magazine. She told Barnhouse, "I can't tell you how many times in my discouragement I have closed my eyes and seen you scratching on that postal box with your key. God let me scratch the edges of success, but He gave me nothing in place of Himself."

PRIDE

James 4:2b ...You do not have, because you do not ask God.

Again, anger is the result of unmet expectations. You wake up on Saturday morning and you think to yourself, "I have the day off, I am just going to sit around and do nothing." However, your wife wakes up on Saturday morning thinking that there is a lot that needs to get done today, so here is a list of what you need to do, there is going to be problems. Why? The problem is unmet expectations.

If life is all about you, if you are the center of your universe, there is bound to be conflict.

Pride means that we focus on self. We try to do for ourselves, by ourselves. We look to the wrong source. Instead of relying on God we look to other things to fulfil our desires.

Prayerlessness in itself is evidence of pride. Why don't I pray? Because I don't think I need God. If I really thought I was more dependent upon God and I needed Him more I'd pray more. James says we'd have a lot more peace if we just prayed more. We'd have a lot less to worry about, a lot less to argue about, a lot less to fight over if we just prayed more. The key to joy is dependence on God.

Proverbs 13:10 Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.

As that old song says, "Oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer."

Jesus understood that conflicting desires caused problems. He said;

1 John 2:15-16 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For everything in the world -- the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does -- comes not from the Father but from the world.

Notice the three things he talks about here, possessions, pleasure and pride. These things can separate us from God and lead to conflict in our lives. So, what is the solution?

James 4:6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

God hates everything in our lives that breeds self-reliance because He wants us to be totally reliant on him. Have you ever noticed that God has a unique way of engineering circumstances to remind us of our dependence on him? Just about the time you think, "I've got it together!" suddenly everything around you start to fall apart.

What is the cure? James says the cure is grace. Grace is God's power to change. What would you like to change about yourself? What do you want to change about your relationships, your marriage, your family? Whatever that is, you cannot change that on your own, you need God's help.

How do we get God's help? We humble ourselves and ask for it. We admit our weakness and request God's strength. In the next few verses, James gives four specific actions that need to be taken in order to stop the fighting. Here's how you diffuse a conflict, whether it's between you and a kid, you and your wife, you and someone at work. You do four things to diffuse a conflict:

1. Be Submissive

James 4:7 Submit yourselves, then, to God...

Let God be God in your life. Give Him control. Put Him in charge. Yield yourself to Him. This is the starting point. Quit trying to run your own life. James says that conflict that happens with other people happens because you have conflict on the inside. You don't get along with other people because you've got a civil war in your life. This is the real issue. The starting point is getting peace inside before you can have peace outside. Find peace of mind and peace in your heart.

The real conflict is inside of you. Who is in charge of your life? If you think that you are in charge, then anytime something happens and things do not go the way you want, then you get upset. You want things to go just the way you want them to go and when they don't go that way, it makes you mad. But if God's in charge of your life, it doesn't irritate you as much.

Colossians 3:15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

In 1988 I went to China one summer on a mission's trip to teach English. On the way home we were supposed to fly from Beijing in the North to Guangzhou in the South and then catch a train to Hong Kong. However, things did not work out the way we planned. Our flight was delayed, so by the time we got to Guangzhou and made our way to the train station we had missed our train and we were stranded. It was really hot, and we did not have the money for a hotel room, so the team just decided that we would sit outside until the morning and catch the train then. The idea of spending a night sitting out on the concrete in the heat was not very appealing, but we had no choice. Or so we thought.

One person on the team said that we should pray. So, we did. While we were praying, I felt that God said get up and go over to the office building across the road and knock on the door. It was late at night and the building was closed so I thought I must have been hearing God wrong, but I did as I felt God had instructed. I got up and walked over and knocked on the door. A man answered the door (miracle number 1) and the man spoke perfect English (miracle number 2). I explained our problem and he invited the whole team to come in and spend the night in the lobby of this beautiful office building, with big comfy couches, pillows and air conditioning! (miracle number 3) Our plans did not go as expected, but God had other plans. Better plans.

When we think that we are in control of our lives we think that where we go is up to us, and therefore we try to manipulate and push and control others to try to move them around to get what we want out of life. When we give God control of our lives, everything changes. When you learn to say "Thy will be done" instead of "My will be done" everything changes. It is putting God first. When you can say "Lord, whatever You want that's what I want" then the peace process starts. Be submissive.

2. Be Sensible

James 4:7 ... Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Be aware, be alert. The word "resist" is a war term. It means to be prepared. To stand against. The devil wants to destroy your marriage. He wants to destroy every other good relationship. Why? Because he loves conflict and arguments. He wants to cause confusion, stress, hurt feelings, disappointment, anger, chaos. He loves to do it. James says you've got to give into God, let Him have control. Then you've got to do some defensive action. You've got to resist the devil and realize what he's doing. If you get up in the morning and you don't run into the devil, head on, it means you're already going in the same direction.

Martin Luther was often very graphic in his description of the activities of the Devil. Asked one time how he overcame the Devil, he replied, "Well, when the devil comes knocking upon the door of my heart, and asks, 'Who lives here?' the dear Lord Jesus goes to the door and says, 'Martin Luther used to live here but he has moved out. Now I live here.' The Devil seeing the nail-prints in the hands and the pierced side, takes flight immediately."

How does the devil operate? He plays on our pride. Particularly wounded pride. He tells us what we want to hear. He whispers in our ear. He gives us little thoughts, suggestions, ideas. When you're in the middle of an argument, he starts whispering in your ear, things like "You don't have to take this kind of stuff. Retaliate. Who do they think they are? Get even. Assert yourself. Don't put up with this kind of stuff. Show them who's boss." He tells you all the things your pride would love to hear. You need to say, "Satan, I know that's you." Resist him.

How do you resist the devil? Same way Jesus did it. Head on. He quoted Scripture. The next time you get into an argument, stop and think, "How am I being prideful here. What am I not willing to admit? Why am I not willing to compromise? Where am I only thinking of myself and not the other person's needs, desires, attitudes."

There is a great promise here. It says, "*Resist the devil and he will flee.*" You don't have to put up with him. Give in to God and get wise to Satan.

Many sheep ranchers in the Western US have tried just about everything to stop crafty coyotes from killing their sheep. They use odor sprays and electric fences. Some even camp out with the lambs during the summer thinking the presence of people will scare them away. However, none of these methods work. Some ranchers were losing more than fifty lambs a year. Recently ranchers found a solution that works. Llamas. Llamas are aggressive. They are not afraid of anything. When they see something, they put their head up and run straight toward it. That is aggressive behavior as far as the coyote is concerned, and they won't have anything to do with that . . . Coyotes are opportunists, and llamas take that opportunity away. Be submissive and sensible.

3. Be Sanctified

James 4:8 Come near to God and he will come near to you...

In my life I have found that there is a direct correlation between my relationship with God and my relationship with others. When I have spent time with God and feel close to Him, I am a better father, husband and person in general. I am more patient, more loving and more forgiving. When I have neglected my relationship with God and not spent time in fellowship with Him, I am more bitter, more unloving and less patient with others. That is just how it works.

Why? Because peace with God leads to peace with self and therefore peace with others. You cannot give what you have not first received. When God has richly deposited Himself in your life it is easy to make withdrawals and give to others. However, when that account has run dry and you have nothing left to withdraw, there are problems.

That means that you need to constantly be seeking God and spending time with Him. It has to be a lot more than just going to church. Have you noticed some people only draw close to God when they're in trouble? They only pray when they have a need. That is a problem. You do not spend time with Christ just to receive, so that your own life will be enriched. You spend time with God so that you are able to give. So that other people's lives will be enriched. Not just to take a drink from God's goodness but to be a well of his goodness flowing into the lives of others.

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Notice that is intentional. It is something you have to plan to do. That means a daily quiet time. It means making the most of every opportunity to pray and read the bible.

The conflict in your life is in direct proportion to the time you're spending with God. Be submissive, sensible and sanctified.

4. Be Sorry

James 4:8 ...Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double- minded. 9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

If you want to stop the conflicts in your life, you have to learn to ask forgiveness from God and from those you hurt and also learn to forgive yourself. You need to clean up your act. You need to learn to take sin seriously. You need to be sorry for your self-centeredness. Be willing to ask forgiveness.

Life is about giving, not about getting. The secret to a blessed life is simple, give and it will be given to you. It is in loving others that we find love. It is in giving that we receive. It is in meeting the needs of others that our own needs are met.

Someone has said that the only person God sends away empty is the person full of himself.

So where are you at today? Maybe you have already learned this lesson. Maybe you never argue with your spouse or kids. If that is the case, great. However, maybe you are here today and you are in trouble. Maybe the relationships in your life are falling apart.

Maybe you have heard of Larry Walters, a 33-year-old man who decided he wanted to see his neighborhood from a new perspective. So, he went down to the local army surplus store and bought forty-five used weather balloons. That afternoon he strapped himself into a lawn chair, to which several of his friends tied the now helium-filled used weather balloons. He took with him, something to drink, a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, and a BB gun, figuring he could shoot the balloons one at a time when he was ready to land. Walters, who assumed the balloons would lift him about 100 feet in the air, was caught off guard when the chair soared more than 11,000 feet into the sky -- right into the middle of the air traffic pattern at Los Angeles International Airport. Because he was too frightened to shoot any of the balloons, he stayed airborne for more than two hours, and forced the airport to shut down its runways for much of the afternoon. Soon after he was safely grounded and cited by the police, reporters asked him three questions: Were you scared? Yes. Would you do it again? No. Why did you do it? Well, you got to do something, you can't just sit there.

Some of you need a new perspective in your relationships. If there are problems, you can't just do nothing and sit there and let the problems continue. As a church we can help. There are people all around you that have been through what you are going through now.

Most important, if you are having problems with arguments with others, the first thing you need to do is own your part in it. You are not responsible for the actions of others, but you are responsible for your part. Make sure that your relationship with Jesus is solid. The closer you are to Jesus the better parent, spouse and person you will be.