

Pleasures at War!

- James 4:1-3
- Thom S. Rainer, the CEO of Lifeway, offered a list on his blog of church disputes he had heard about. Then he made a comment about them.
- **Argument over the appropriate length of the worship pastor's beard** (*I think I saw a verse in Scripture that indicated it is to be no more than 1.5 inches longer than the pastor's beard.*).
- **Fight over whether or not to build a children's playground or to use the land for a cemetery** (*I'm dying to know the resolution of this one.*).
- **A deacon accusing another deacon of sending an anonymous letter, and deciding to settle the matter in the parking lot** (*The church could have sold tickets to this event and raised a lot of money.*).
- **A fight over which picture of Jesus to put in the foyer** (*I just want to know who took the pictures.*).
- **A dispute over whether the worship leader should have his shoes on during the service** (*I vote for shoes, shirts, and pants.*).
- **A big church argument over the discovery that the church budget was off \$0.10. Someone finally gave a dime to settle the issue** (*I have to admit this issue is ten times more important than the church missing a penny.*).
- **Two different churches reported fights over the type of coffee. In one of the churches, they moved from Folgers to a stronger Starbucks brand. In the other church, they simply moved to a stronger blend. Members left the church in the latter example** (*Perhaps they started a new church: The Right Blend Fellowship.*).
- **An argument on whether the church should allow deviled eggs at the church meal** (*Only if it's balanced with angel food cake for dessert.*).
- **A disagreement over using the term "potluck" instead of "pot blessing"** (*I get it! The concept of luck contradicts the theology of a sovereign God. This issue is very serious. Good luck trying to resolve it.*).
- These are funny. And sad. By the way, one of the church fights was about whether it is ok to use cran-grape juice instead of grape juice for communion. I scrolled down to the comments section on Rainer's blog, and saw that a huge fight erupted about this! In a semi-satirical piece about how silly church fights can be, a man got his shorts twisted up and started a blog-fight!

• The Root of Conflict

- James is not laughing when he asks the question, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" Why did he ask that question? What does that tell you about the churches he was sending his letter to? There were quarrels and fights in them! It's funny to me whenever I hear someone say, "We need to get back to the First Century church," as if those churches didn't have sinners in them like we do here at Antioch! There was racism in the first church in Jerusalem. Read about it in Acts 6. There was unspeakable sexual sin in the church in Corinth. There were also factions, groups who were separating themselves from the rest of the congregation in Corinth, saying, "I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, or I am of Peter." There was a dispute in the church in Philippi between two women that Paul had to address in his letter. So James asks a question for the ages, doesn't he? It is a question that we must ask of ourselves, our marriages, our families, our church, and our relationships at work and in the communities where we live: "What causes the quarrels and the fights among us?" Each of us parents has asked that of our children, haven't we? "What is going on, here? What started this fight?" Let's say we were having an intense disagreement with our spouse over something in another room, and we hear World War 3 break out between the kids. When we ask the kids why they were fighting, their answer is no different than the answer for why we, their parents, were fighting! Here's the answer, and James gives it to us with another rhetorical question:
- "Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?" James goes right to the heart of the problem, that all quarrels and fights start with our passions. Our desires. Our pleasures. The word in the Greek

is “hedone,” from which we get the concept of hedonism. Hedonism is the pursuit of pleasure, but it goes beyond mere pursuit. Hedonists believe that pleasure is the chief end of man. And if you believe that you are on this planet for your own personal pleasure, then how will you respond when someone gets in the way of you experiencing that pleasure? Right. With quarrels and with fights. But here’s the thing. Pleasure is not a sin in itself. In fact, God has given us as humans an incredible capacity for it. Sweet potato casserole at Thanksgiving gives me a great deal of pleasure, and always tastes like more. The problem comes when pleasure becomes our chief pursuit. Jesus talked about it in the parable of the sower. The seed that fell among thorns sprang up quickly but was choked out by what Jesus called “the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things.” (Mark 4:19) Paul said in Titus 3:3 that in our natural state, without Christ, we are “slaves to various passions and pleasures.” But now, as believers, if we are still slaves to pleasure, then there’s a war within us, and that war affects other people as well. Maybe you’ve seen the commercial where the wife says to her husband, “Don’t forget we’re taking my mom and dad out on the boat this Sunday.” The man grimaces. Then we see him drive in his Hyundai to the marina, untie the boat, and shove it away from the dock with his foot. As it drifts away he says, “Not my Sunday.” The voiceover comes up: “Hyundai, the official car of the NFL.” His pleasure came first.

- Some of you have read the book, *Desiring God*, by John Piper. I highly recommend it. He wrote the book to propose his view of what he calls Christian Hedonism. Here’s a quote: “My shortest summary of it (Christian Hedonism) is: *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.* Or: The chief end of man is to glorify God *by* enjoying him forever. Does Christian Hedonism make a god out of pleasure? No. It says that we all make a god out of what we take most pleasure in. My life is devoted to helping people make God their God by wakening in them the greatest pleasures in him.”
- If conflict comes from our desires for pleasure, then what happens when we make God our greatest treasure, and knowing Him becomes the source of our greatest pleasure? That’s also a question for the ages, and one we should explore personally. But let’s get back to the text.

- **The Fruit of Conflict**

- Now that James has explained where conflict comes from, our desires, he describes its deadly fruit in verse 2. “You want something you cannot have, so you kill. Or you covet.” Some have tried to dismiss this as hyperbole, or suggest that James was speaking hypothetically here, but most serious scholars disagree. Many believe that there had been quarrels and fights in the churches James wrote to, and those fights had led to murder in some cases. Is that hard for us to believe?
- What was the root of David’s sin with Bathsheba? Where did it come from? His own desire for pleasure. What was the result? First, he coveted. By the way, that’s the first battleground, our mind. And the Lord promises that He will not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability. But with the temptation He will also provide a way of escape.” (1 Cor. 10:13) We can never say, “I couldn’t help it. I had no choice. There was no way out; I had to.” David’s first means of escape came with the season. It was spring, when kings go out to war. He chose not to go. The second escape came when he saw Bathsheba. He did not look away and he did not put away the desire to have her. The third escape came when she was actually in his chambers; even then he could have sent her away and repented. But he coveted. Second, he stole. He took what wasn’t his. Third, he killed. He had Uriah murdered in order to seal the deal. By the way, there were at least two OTHER escapes offered to him when he brought Uriah home as a cover up. But he plowed through both of the barricades and drove his car over the cliff in a way to cover his sins with Bathsheba.
- Let’s take an everyday example that all of us who have children or have been around children much have seen. You tell your precious little girl of two that she cannot have another cookie. The little cherub is standing beside the plate of cookies, and she hears what you said and she knows what it means. But then you watch in amazement as she stretches out her hand so that it is just above the cookies, while she looks at you, and you tell her one more time, you cannot have another cookie; don’t touch those cookies! And she takes one and shoves the whole thing in her mouth. What is going on?

Her craving is in conflict with your command. Her desire for pleasure is more powerful than her desire to obey, or even her fear of punishment. May I remind you that this is why we must win those battles and we must train our children to obey the first time and learn what it means to go without, or to be bored, or to have to sit and wait, or to work hard when they'd rather be playing? Because there will come a time, many times, when their cravings will be in conflict with God's command. And you will not be there to say, "Don't watch that movie. Don't take that drug. Don't go to that boy's house. Don't cheat on that test. Don't take that money. Or even, Don't leave your wife."

- Several years ago Todd Wilson put this picture on his weekly newsletter. He knows this family. This was written by a 11-yr old daughter of an alcoholic, and she pushed it under the bathroom door as her father was in there 'recovering' from one of his drunken episodes.
- Giving in to our desires for pleasure and making them our God not only destroys relationships. It perverts prayer. James says, (2a) "You do not have because you do not ask. (3) You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." In other words, someone for whom personal pleasure is most important either doesn't pray much at all, or he prays selfishly. Why pray if you know enough about God to understand that He cares for your purity more than your possessions? Instead of praying only for possessions, we need to pray for purity! You do not have a changed heart, God would say, because you do not ask for it. You only ask for your own pleasures. Or, we do ask and do not receive because "you ask wrongly (with the wrong motives), to spend it on your passions." When someone prays this way, he is not asking God, but telling Him what to do, and then gets upset when God doesn't obey. Many a bitter person has taken out his frustrations at God on the members of the church, and caused damage that could have been avoided if he had first looked at his own heart, at the battles raging there, at his selfish desires that have been justified or baptized in his own mind and made 'holy.'
- What's the answer? James has a great word of hope for us in verse 6, which will be for next time. But let's look there as we close. Here's the good news: "He gives more grace." God came in the person of Jesus Christ with grace and truth, and no matter how messed up we become in our thinking or our doing, God gives more grace. Grace: the most powerful source of pleasure in the world, for it is by grace that we are saved and by grace that we are His. Do you believe that? The proud will reject it. But the humble will receive it.