

Partnership in God

by Jim Graham

Jim Graham's sermon emphasizes the importance of addressing conflicts among believers through humility, prayer, and unity in Christ.

Duration: 42:14

Scripture: James 4:1

Topics: "Conflict Resolution", "Spiritual Humility"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the importance of addressing and resolving conflicts within the church, focusing on the sources of conflict such as personal desires, prayer with wrong motives, misplaced priorities, and pride. It highlights the need to confront these issues, seek God's provision through grace, and take practical steps like submitting to God, resisting the devil, drawing near to God, repenting, purifying the heart, and humbling oneself before the Lord.

Transcript

Well, I feel very safe under the leadership of these men whom God has raised up in this place and to come into the fellowship here as a visitor and yet as a brother in Christ and as the Lord's servant. It just is such a releasing experience to identify and then gladly to submit to the leadership of those that God has appointed in this place. And I want you to know that, that I haven't come to do my own thing but to acknowledge the structure that's here and with the freedom that the Spirit of God gives then to minister in the name of the Lord Jesus.

I hope you had a good night. Last night I had. I slept well in this place.

I'm not sure whether it's the sleep of the just or whether it's the sleep of exhaustion, but it's sleep anyway. There's a little piece of dog roll that says Mary had a little lamb. She also had a sheep that came to the Bethany conference and it died through lack of sleep.

I hope that would not be true in your situation. Well now, I probably have struggled over this morning's session more than any other session for this conference. It seemed like that this session was tucked in somewhere and it wasn't in the mainstream of the morning teaching that I feel God would have me share and in some senses didn't seem to fit into the mainstream of the evening teaching.

It just tucked in here on this Saturday morning. I suppose I struggled with this for several weeks and Anne would know that as we thought about the conference and prayed for it and talked about it and so on that this has been a concern that I've had in my heart. I'm just saying to David before we came in this morning that although I was trained in two seminaries and I spent six years at university and I was brought up within an evangelical church and I've known about God all my life, there are two things that no one ever took me aside and taught me.

One is I've never been taught how to fail. I've had to learn that the hard way. There'll be many failures in my life, but nobody ever taught me how to fail.

Nobody ever taught me that failure with God is never final and failure is not failure as long as you learn some lessons out of it, but through all the struggles and failures God has taught me many, many lessons, but nobody ever gave me some kind of framework in which I could insert this very real experience of my life. The other area that nobody ever taught me as I was training for the pastoral ministry, nobody ever taught me how to handle conflict within the church, and again that's been part of my life since 1953. I've been so blessed by God.

I can't even begin to tell you how good God has been to us as a couple and as a family. To me as an individual, that's been a very wonderful experience. I think it was here that Ann said something that we felt for a very long time, that we feel like we are two of God's spoiled children.

God has been so overwhelmingly kind and good to us. But there have been conflicts. The reason for the conflict is people.

The source of conflict, I think very often, not always, but often comes from the dominion of darkness. We have a very distinguished surgeon in our congregation and he said to me not so very many weeks ago, he said, I love the practice of medicine, it's the patients that are the problem. And I sense, I love the work of the kingdom, I love the work of the church, and I love being a pastor.

Sometimes it's the people who are the problem. And so I've decided, and I ask you to receive this in the spirit with which I want to share it with you this morning, I'd like to speak about handling conflict among the people of God. The letter of James chapter four and the first ten verses.

All I want to do is simply unpack these verses and leave them to you. If they apply to you, that's good. If they don't, that's still good.

But if they don't apply now, maybe they'll apply tomorrow or next week. I'm certain that they will apply at some time. So this is very relevant teaching for all of us.

You'll realize that James is a very practical piece of writing, a little fragment in the New Testament of five chapters. And his basis, his basic thrust is that belief must behave. That what we profess we must perform.

The whole five chapters are really an emphasis of teaching that says faith must have shoes on its feet in order to walk in obedience and in righteousness in the ways of God. Way back in the first chapter, there is a very interesting verse four. Make sure that your endurance carries you all the way without failing so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Canon J.B. Phillips, in his paraphrase, it's not a translation, he says, you will find that you have become men of mature character, I presume women too, men of integrity with no weak spots. Part of the problem is that you cannot be vertically related without being horizontally related. You understand what I'm saying? There's no such thing in the Bible as isolated religion.

There's no such thing in the New Testament as an unattached Christian. And the reality of our vertical relationship will be demonstrated in our horizontal relationships. In fact, the Bible is painfully clear.

The Bible says that if your horizontal relationships are not in order, then your vertical relationship is not in order. So the reality of my relationship to God will be demonstrated and manifested in my relationships with my brothers and sisters in Jesus. That's the truth.

A man called Dr. John A. McKay from your own country here once said we become related to Christ singly, but we cannot live in Christ separately. That's the truth. That's what the Bible declares.

There's no such thing as private religion with Lord Melbourne who once said religion is a private affair. He was wrong. Religion or Christianity is a personal affair, but it can never be private.

And therein lies the joy, but also some of the pain. That lies behind James chapter 4 and verses 1 to 10. Where do all the fights and quarrels among you come from? Well, he says they don't come from out there.

They come from in here. He says they come from your desires for pleasure, which are constantly fighting within you. Now there's a little Greek word there that's translated my translation within this perfectly legitimate translation, simply two letters E-N, N, but it also can be translated among you.

So not only personal conflict in terms of turbulence that goes on inside me, but it's also conflict in relationships. You want things, verse 2, but you can't have them, so you're ready to kill, kill people in a whole variety of ways. You don't need a revolver.

You don't need a shotgun. You don't need a long bladed knife to kill people. You can kill people by the words you speak, by the attitudes you have, by the responses that you make.

You strongly desire things, but you cannot get them, so you quarrel and fight, he says, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. You don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it, and when you ask, you don't receive it because your motives are bad. You ask for things to use for your own pleasure.

Unfaithful people, literally adulteresses, mortalities is the word. Don't you know that to be the world's friend means to be God's enemy? Whoever wants to be the world's friend makes himself God's enemy. You can't have both.

You can't have a foot in both camps. You're either going the way of the world, and that will dominate your life, or you're going the way of God. You can't have both.

It's what it says. This is Scripture. Don't think that there's no truth in the Scripture that says the spirit that God placed in us is filled with fierce desires.

That's one of the most difficult verses in the New Testament, but the grace that God gives is even stronger. God wants to provide in our conflicts, in our tensions, in our struggles, together as the Scripture says, God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. Then in verses 7 to 10, there's a prescription.

Go to the doctor. The doctor examines you, takes your blood pressure, takes your temperature, listens to your heart, looks into your eyes and your ears and all that kind of stuff. Then he writes out a prescription.

You can either take it or leave it, but if you leave it, you're foolish because normally he knows what he's talking about. Here is a divine prescription for handling conflict among the people of God. So then submit yourselves to God.

Resist the devil and he'll run away from you. Come near to God and he'll come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners.

Purify your hearts, you hypocrites. Be sorrowful, cry and weep. Here's the bit that you hope I don't get to this morning.

Change your into crying, your joy into gloom. Who is this Scotsman who has come here? Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up. There are three basic areas that I want to teach into this morning in handling conflict among the people of God and the first is that we need to admit that there is a problem.

That's not actually stated, but it's inferred. James doesn't begin if or perhaps or maybe. He goes right in in the first verse.

Where do all the fights and quarrels among you come from? Then he begins to unravel the swords. James here is referring to bad attitudes in contrast to the beautiful attitudes of the Sermon on the Mount or the Beatitudes. In these five chapters there's a whole amount, wealth of material that comes right out of Matthew 5 to chapter 7 and there's a whole wealth of other material that comes out of the Old Testament from the book of Proverbs.

But James here is addressing bad attitudes that are to be found among believers. Those have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. Those have been filled with the Holy Spirit.

You see the man is concerned about the church which is supposed to be a model for society. The one thing that society has never achieved, it has never achieved living together. We're divided.

You're divided in the United States. We are divided in the United Kingdom. We're divided socially.

We're divided economically. We're divided educationally. We're divided domestically.

We're divided racially. We're divided ecclesiastically. We're divided personally.

We live in a divided society and we declare to that society God has given us the ministry of reconciliation and the world says show us. That's the concern that Jesus had in the Lord's Prayer. I mean the Lord's Prayer, not the disciples' prayer.

The Lord's Prayer is in John chapter 17. The disciples' prayer is in the early chapters of Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount. And the heart cry of Jesus just before he went to the cross was that we might be one as you Father are in me and I in you so let them be one that the world might know who I am.

It's not a false unity, not a man-made unity, not finding the lowest common denominator. I've lived all my working life against that kind of stuff and it doesn't work. It's the unity that the Spirit gives.

The heart cry of the Bible is that we would maintain that unity, not create it. The Spirit's ministry is to unify. It's sin that divides.

And our task on the people of God is to maintain this precious, strong but fragile thing called unity. And that's what he's after here. It's not difficult to stand up and sing with the leaders.

Then they'll know that we are Christians by our love, by our love and all the while we know that there are things that are not right amongst us. Now the first thing if we're ever going to handle conflict among the people of God is to express it, to recognize it, to see it, to admit it. I've already spoken about my mother in this conference.

Her memory is very precious to me. She died when she was 51. She died with cancer and I learned after it was discovered that she had recognized in her body signs that were unmistakably clear that all was not well.

I've no idea why she did nothing about it. Maybe she was afraid. Maybe she was too busy.

Maybe her program just kept her going and going and going. She did nothing about it. I don't know why.

From a human point of view that ultimately killed her. When you recognize there's a problem, for God's sake don't deny it. Don't gloss over it.

I'm speaking now about spiritual relationship. Often we love to evade issues. I've no heart for conflict.

I hate it in the church but it's a fact of life and it needs to be dealt with. This is what this is about. Ladies and gentlemen, I know I've been involved for a lifetime in it, that it's possible to be in the same church.

You can sing the same hymns. You can share the same prayers and you listen the same word. You can contribute to the same offering.

You can actually break the same bread and in your heart there's resentment and resistance and antagonism and conflict and tension and coldness. God help us. But it's true.

That's what this passage is all about. Disregard it and the infection will continue and it will cripple the body and it will spread to others because it's infectious. And the result is that the vitality and the health and the progress and the growth and the maturing will all dissipate.

What is it about? So first of all, first step is to admit there's a problem. If there is, maybe there isn't, but if there is, confront it. Secondly, examine it.

James says there are four sources that create conflict among the people of God. They're very simple. They're absolutely clear.

In the first verses, verses one and two, where all the fights and quarrels among you come from, they come from your desires for pleasure. That's the source. That's the first source, which are constantly fighting within you or among you.

You want things but you cannot have them so you are ready to kill. You strongly desire things but you can't get them so you quarrel and fight. What's the first source of the problem? The first source is pleasure.

That seems a bit ridiculous. How can pleasure be a source of problem? Pleasure is attractive. There's something that's winsome and we enjoy so much that God has given us.

God isn't some kind of tyrant who, when we move in something that we enjoy, he says, stop it. That's not like that. What's the man talking about? Well, the word here that's used is the Greek word hedonon.

I don't want to give the impression that I'm a Greek scholar. It just so happens that I have a good book at home that tells me that. Hedonon, the word from which we get our word hedonism.

Maybe you never heard of it but that's what this, in verse one, desires for pleasure. The word is hedonon, hedonism. It means making pleasure your philosophy of life.

That becomes your pursuit. That becomes the top priority, the thing that's high in your profile. Now that's, that's very high in society's profile.

I don't know the United States but I do know the United Kingdom. You ask most people what is the overriding desire in your life and they'll say I just want to be happy. And so I'll organize my life and I'll use my money and I'll move here and there in order to be happy.

And I don't hear too many people saying the overriding thing in my life is I want to be holy. That's the way we're supposed to live, isn't it? I mean if you say that outside they think who is this guy wants to be holy, this self-righteous pharisaical, jumped-up religious pig. I don't know if you know these words but these are not nice words in our our country.

That's how people react to somebody who says I just want to be holy. Everybody wants to be happy. I want to be happy too actually.

It so happens I want to be holy. Oh there's another way of expressing it. A person who says I'm just looking for a good time.

That's not much to ask. I don't hurt anybody. I don't steal from anybody.

I pay my taxes. I obey the laws of the land. I just want a good time.

And so many people who are saying I just want to be good. You see wanting to be happy and have a good time that's normative. That's the way that society is based and that's the way that it's running.

But when you say I want to be holy and I want to be good then people back off. And actually sometimes they back off in the church. Because there are those among the believers whose only desire is to get what they want.

To express their feelings. To require their way and their will to be done because that will make them happy. That's what the man is speaking about in the first two verses.

Come from your desires for pleasure. Your desires for self-fulfillment. Your desires to get your own way.

Your desires so that it will happen the way that you want it to happen. That's really what it's about here. They're constantly fighting within you or among you.

You want things but you can't have them so you're ready to kill. You'll go to any lengths and you'll do any amount of damage because of these this strong desire for things. You can't get them so you quarrel and

fight.

Now I know that's true of the bible is talking nonsense and so underlying conflict in the church is this deep thing that's revving within us. Head on on. Strong desire.

Secondly, now this will surprise you. This is what it says. Second cause of the trouble is prayer.

You do not have what you want, verse two, because you do not ask God for it and when you ask you don't receive it because your motives are bad. You ask for things to use for your own pleasure. How can prayer screw you up? How can prayer make you twisted? How can prayer cause conflict among the people of God? Well he tells us there are two things here.

First of all there's the absence of prayer. You do not have what you want because you do not ask God for it. The problem of prayer sometimes is that we don't pray.

Huh? We shouldn't be surprised that things go wrong but prayerlessness is often a chronic problem in the church. I mean how many have been committed to saturate this fellowship day by day by day by day in prayer? How many? I'm not here to accuse. I'm only here to ask questions.

So often we go ahead selfishly for what we want. We never ask God is this what you want father? This is what I want and we've decided what we want so why should we pray for it? I mean at least that's honest. I've decided why should I pray? Actually if I expose myself in prayer to God it's just possible he might tell me what he wants and I don't want to know what he wants because I know what I want and what he wants what I want may come into conflict so why should I pray? That's what the man is saying here at the end of verse 2. Prayer has a very powerful way of giving us God's perspective and when I don't want God's perspective I don't pray.

You don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. So the first problem so far as prayer is concerned is the absence of prayer but then he goes on to speak about the abuse of prayer. Verse 3 when you ask you don't receive it because your motives are bad.

You ask for things to use for your own pleasure. Not only the problem of the absence of prayer but the problem of inappropriate prayer. We have decided where we want to go, what we want to do, how things should happen and we need an ally and what better ally is a Christian to have than God.

So I'll ask God to come in and endorse what I want because I've already decided that that's what I want and that's what he's saying. In verse 3 when you ask you don't receive it because your motives are bad. You ask for things to use for your own pleasure and God says no.

I will not endorse what you want. God sometimes wants to change rather than to endorse what we are saying because his thoughts are higher than ours and his ways are different from ours and he wants to change us rather than reinforce us. And when God says no, surprising how Christians sometimes react.

They become disgruntled. They're not sure. Not sure that God really answers my prayers.

We find our worship is at a low end and we make comments about the kind of mechanics of worship and all that kind of stuff and often that's a cop-out. Because where there's worship in my heart actually the mechanics don't really matter. And then we get withdrawn from other people who are in the fellowship.

Not sure that we want any deep fellowship anymore. We become twisted and all screwed up. So he speaks of pleasure, then he speaks of prayer, and thirdly he speaks about our priorities, unfaithful people, verse 4, literally adulterous.

Don't you know that to be the world's friend means to be God's enemy? Whoever wants to be the world's friend makes himself God's enemy. Kind of both. You're either pleasing the world or you're pleasing God.

You're either submitting to the world's standards and the world's ways or you're submitting to God's standards and God's ways. It's, I mean, it's open and shut. It's black and white.

Not if. It's very clear what he's saying here. To be a friend of the world is to be an enemy of God.

He's not speaking about sexual sin here when he speaks about adulterous sins. In the Bible, there are plenty of instances that to be faithful to God, the lover of souls is sometimes in contrast to those who are disobedient and unfaithful to God, and these are adulterers or adulteresses. He'd ask the question, I want to be God's friend, but I want to settle for what pleases the world.

I want to do it the world's way. I don't want to do God's way. I do both.

Depends what your priority is. Am I going to allow my self-centeredness to motivate me or will I allow, will I allow the Holy Spirit to motivate me? Where's my priority? That's what he's talking about in verse four. Then he goes on, don't think that there is no truth in the scripture that says the spirit that God placed in us is filled with fears, desires.

There's a conflict between the flesh and the spirit, between the human and the divine, between the earthly and the heavenly, and that will cause conflict in the church always. I know. I've come out of it.

I'm going back into it. I know. The Bible is absolutely clear in its diagnosis.

Then fourthly, the grace that God gives is even stronger. The scripture says God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. So the fourth thing is pride.

First of all, pleasure. Secondly, prayer. Thirdly, priority.

Fourthly, pride. Pride is to be full of yourself, to be absorbed with yourself, to have your own intentions, your own ideas, your own wishes, your own way, and your own will carried out by everybody else. Because at the center of the world is me, and actually as a Christian at the center of my world ought to be God.

But pride manifests itself when I move into the place that God has. First of all, let's look and acknowledge there is a problem. Let's confront it.

Let's not deny it or skate over it or ignore it. Let's confront it. Secondly, let's examine it.

Where is the source of this trouble? Where is it coming from? And then finally, we need to address the problem. Verses seven to ten, we address it in two ways. First of all, by receiving God's provision.

Verse six, the grace that God gives is even stronger. Hallelujah. We're going to address the problem now that we understand it.

We need to emphasize that God makes provision for his people, and grace is all that we need to do all that he requires. Yeah. Grace, good definition, is all that we need to do all that he requires.

We're not asked. To get into some form of self-effort within this conflict and tension. That's not it.

Submit to grace. Allow the grace of God to flow in our hearts. That's how to be resolved.

If we love Jesus, if we honor God, if we respond to the Holy Spirit, if we recognize the church is what Jesus died for, if we recognize that the church is Jesus' new body on earth, and so it's precious, then we need to respond to the grace of God. God gives us what we don't deserve in order that we can be obedient. Grace is the sheer undeserved generosity of the heart of God.

Now, I know that it's 5 to 11, and there are 10 things, and I'll run through them in five minutes. You may not believe that. I'm not sure I do myself, but I'll, we'll see how we just, if you have a pencil, just take a note of it.

They're so clear that I don't need to comment on them. Verse seven, submit yourselves to God. Now, that's not a negative word.

It's a very positive, creative. It's not a weak word. It's a strong, rugged word.

Actually, it's a military word. It's a military term. It means to be allied to, to enlist on the side of.

This word, submit. Submit yourselves to God. Make sure that you're on God's side, that you are no longer enlisting on the old army of self-centeredness, but you're now enlisting in the army of God and his way of doing things.

That's what it means. Submit yourselves to God. Secondly, resist the devil, and we're saying yesterday or the day before.

Many Christians imagine that they're living in peacetime. We're not. We're living in wartime.

There's a battle on, folks. God hasn't called us to be civilians. We're called to be soldiers.

And there's a powerful enemy, but he's a defeated enemy. And he who is within us is greater than he who is in the world. And that's why we can say on this checklist, resist the devil.

Because Christ has died. Christ has risen. And Christ will come again.

The definitive battle has been fought and won on the cross of Calvary. And we enter into the victory of Jesus. And we can stand firm in the strength which God supplies through his eternal son, so we can resist him.

His desire is to create conflict and tension in the church. Resist him, and he'll back off, it says. Thirdly, verse eight, come near to God, and he will come near to you.

God often seems so distant. We ask questions. Why is God so distant? Why has God turned away from me? The fact is, he isn't, and he hasn't.

And our approach very often is, God, you draw near to me, and I'll draw near to you. But that's not what the Bible says. It says, come near to God, and he will come near to you.

These three things, submit, resist, come near, are the exercise of our will. God is near, and we need to exercise our wills to come near to him. Number four, wash your hands, you sinners, for something in your life that's sinful, and you know it's wrong, it's external.

It may be that you're gossiping. It may be that you're telling the truth, but it's not the whole truth. It may be that you're inciting division.

It may be that you've gathered a little group around you, and you feed from them, and they feed from you, and all that kind of stuff. And the Bible says, wash your hands. There are things that are ungodly.

They're external. They're out there, and they're wrong, and you need to be cleansed from them. Number five, purify your hearts.

Not only is there an external problem, there's an internal problem. Your motives, your reactions, your intentions, your desires, and all that kind of thing are all twisted. You need to purify your hearts.

What you seem on the outside is not actually what you are on the inside, and it's only the Holy Spirit who can help you here. Number five, be sorrowful, cry, and weep. Then there's a cluster here of three things.

I've lost my place. Be sorrowful, cry, and weep. All these words will be familiar in a Jewish background, because they're all Jewish words, and they have to do with genuine repentance.

Be sorrowful, cry, and weep. Very common in Hebrew thoughts, a call to a Biblical repentance. Number nine, change your laughter into crying, and your joy into gloom.

You need to know the context that I've already described in order to understand this number nine. It's a word that's given to people who are totally dominated by their own pleasures and their own desires, their own concern to be happy and fulfilled, and all that kind of stuff. There are things in the Christian life that we need to do, not because we enjoy them, or because we delight in them, or because we feel fulfilled by them, but because they are right, and because they are good, and because they're of God.

That's what number nine is about. Maybe that will drive joy in the doing of them, but this is the issue that's here. And then finally, number 10, humble yourselves before the Lord.

He'll lift you up. Humble yourselves before the Lord. He'll lift you up.

Proverbs chapter three, verse 34, God has no use for conceited people, but shows favor to those who are humble. Like a mighty tortoise moves the church of God. Brothers, we are treading where we've always trod.

We are all divided. Not one body, we, very strong in doctrine, but we can charity. Let's reverse it.

Let's get a hold of the authorized version. Like a mighty army moves the church of God. Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod.

We are not divided. All one body, we, one in faith and doctrine, one in charity. Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war with the cross of Jesus.

Going on before. God bless you.

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