

Introduction:

- A. Illus.: Let me read from an article that appeared in the *New York Times* about four years ago:

MEMPHIS — In the back room of a theater on Beale Street, John Renken, 37, a pastor, recently led a group of young men in prayer. *“Father, we thank you for tonight,” he said. “We pray that we will be a representation of you.”* [So far, so good.]

An hour later, a member of his flock who had bowed his head was now unleashing a torrent of blows on an opponent, and Mr. Renken was offering guidance that was not exactly prayerful. *“Hard punches!”* he shouted from the sidelines of a martial arts event called Cage Assault. *“Finish the fight! To the head! To the head!”*

The young man was a member of a fight team at Xtreme Ministries, a small church near Nashville that doubles as a mixed martial arts academy. Mr. Renken, who founded the church and academy, doubles as the team’s coach. The school’s motto is *“Where Feet, Fist and Faith Collide.”*

(As Dave Barry used to write, *I’m not making this up.*)

The article told about another church near Seattle where the pastor told the reporter, *“Compassion and love—we agree with all that stuff, too, but what led me to find Christ was that Jesus was a fighter.”* That church sells T-shirts that read *“Predestined to Fight.”*ⁱ

I bet those congregational meetings are interesting. I wonder how you get on the Elder Board?

- B. That article notwithstanding, as a general rule, fighting isn’t good for Christians. Turn to **James 4. Jas. 4:1** begins, *“What causes fights and quarrels among you?”* James is not asking, *“Why do you disagree about things.”* We can’t avoid conflicts, issues and tensions in our homes, our small groups, in our church, and elsewhere. We disagree, sometimes deeply. We aggravate each other. We step on toes. We get fed up! And that is especially true when we’re under pressure.

- C. James' issue isn't that we disagree or get frustrated with each other. James confronts us about the battles that follow. We know that because of the words he chose—*fight*s and *quarrel*s. Some translations say, “*What causes wars and fights among you?*” “*Them's fightin' words!*” These are words with bruised knuckles, black eyes, and bloody noses; words clothed in camo and armed with sharp tongues. And remember, he's not talking about the Crusades. He's writing to average Christians, to ordinary churches like ours.
- D. Nobody gets a pass on this passage. You are very nice, peaceable people but this capacity for relationship violence is in all of us, like a baseball bat hidden behind the door. We don't all fight the same way. Some of us come out swinging and others are more subtle. But we're all indicted by this question and James' answer: “*Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?*”

I. OUR DEADLY FIGHTS WITH OTHERS COME FROM WITHIN US (4:1-2a)

- A. James uses strong language here: *fight*s, *quarrel*s, *battle*, *kill*, *covet*. Is this just hyperbole? Rhetorical cannon fire to get our attention? *Boom!!* A rather bombastic way of saying, “*Wouldja be nice and behave?*” No. We excuse our harsh words and boiling feelings too easily. “*Oh, we had a little disagreement. A little dust-up. It'll blow over.*” But James says, “*Don't kid yourself.*” Do you remember what Jesus said in **Matt 5:22**, “*I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. ... And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.*” Our fights with each other—especially in our homes and with other believers—are deadly serious and do terrible damage.
- B. Illus.: This passage and I go way back. We have a history. My first memory of it was when I was in college at Trinity. I was the leader of a seven-member singing group. We were together three years. We sang in churches many weekends and toured for most of three summers. We

rehearsed a couple nights every week. That's a lot of time together. Mostly we got along but, you know, there were a couple people in that group who could really be stubborn and a couple others who just got squirrely sometimes, testing the patience of even the noblest leader!

One night after an especially contentious rehearsal I stormed back to Suite 309, smokin' mad. I was sick and tired of being disrespected and ignored! I'd had it with those people! I can't remember why I happened to pick up my Bible that night but this was the passage I read. "*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?*"

And I vividly remember my double-take. "Wait... what?"

"Don't they come from **your** desires that battle **within you**?"

"No! Not in this case, actually," I thought to myself. "Lord, you and I both know they were impossible tonight. I don't know how I'm supposed to put up with this stuff!"

"Nope," said James, as cold as a headstone, "**your** desires that battle **within you**."

"But I'm the good guy here!" I countered. "Why are you picking on me?"

"No, you're not the good guy," said the Lord.

"Well what about them!" I protested.

"I'm talkin' to **you** and this disgraceful quarrel comes from **your** desires that battle **within you**."

And that was just the first of many times over the last 40 years when God has called me on the carpet with these words. I see James 4 and I think, "Oh, it's you again!" What's more, I can't begin to count how many times I've shared these three verses with others who were tangled in their own wars.

- C. James says that these fights "*come from your desires that battle within you.*" The word means *pleasures*. In Greek, it means *what feels good*. Doesn't have to be bad, but it is certainly a word with a wandering eye. James says that our fights with others are caused by our relentless desires to

feel good—to feel important and to get what we want. Only a few verses earlier, in the passage we studied last week, James talked about how we have “*bitter envy and selfish ambition*” lurking in us like toxic waste. Those **are dark arts of feeling good**. We fight with other people to get what makes us feel good; we war to come out on top. We convince ourselves that we’re reasonable, patient, longsuffering people, but God points to the carnage within us. James isn’t interested in what someone else brings to the war. This is the war within. **My envy and selfish ambition are my problem.**

- D. The detective walks in, looks around at the crime scene—the silhouette in white tape on the floor, the broken lamp, the bloodstain, and he says to his partner, “*So what have we got here.*”

“*Well, sir, I think our perpetrator wanted what this guy had, but he wouldn’t give it over, so our perp killed him.*”

James puts it this way in **v.2a**: “*You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.*” It’s as simple, brutal, and ugly as that, no matter what we tell ourselves.

- E. Illus.: Ever hear of the “warrior gene”? That’s what some people call a version of the **monoamine oxidase-A gene**. Some suggest that under certain conditions people with this gene can get aggressive—maybe even dangerous. It’s pretty sketchy science so far, so don’t worry about it because we’ve got a bigger problem: “***your desires that battle within you.***” There’s your warrior gene! Our own envy and selfish ambition have mutated to make us war-prone.

Now James tells us something else we probably never thought of: **v.2b-3...**

II. OUR DESIRES TO FEEL GOOD AREN’T MET BECAUSE WE DON’T ASK GOD (4:2b-3)

Did you ever have a fight with your mom and when she wouldn’t give you what you wanted you said, “*Well then I’ll just go ask God!*” You know why that’s never happened?

Because it never occurs to us that what we want we could get from God.

- A. “You do not have because you do not ask God.” What should we be asking God for? The subject on the table here is our *desires*, something that *makes us feel good*. James says, “*Why don’t you ask God instead of going to war with someone else?*” The reason, of course, is that whatever it is, we don’t particularly want it from God. We want this so-and-so across from us to fork it over.

In **Ps 103** David begins, “*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.*” He lists five great benefits of our relationship with God and the fifth is that God “*satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.*” [103:5] **It isn’t bad to want to feel good.** It isn’t bad to want to be respected, or to have some peace and quiet, to treasure what is true or to enjoy the fruit of your work. What’s bad is when the envy and selfish ambition within us decide to fight for those feel-good things.

- B. Some Christians will say, in the storm of their fights, “I’ve prayed about this! I’ve asked God to fix this mess. So what more can I do?” And James says in **v.3**, “*When you ask [when you pray], you do not receive, because you ask with **wrong motives**, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.*” That’s the same Greek word as *desires* in v.1. In other words, even if you pray, God won’t give you what you ask for if all you want is to feel good at the other person’s expense. God won’t let us squander his gifts on to satisfy our envy and ambition. It wouldn’t make us more like Jesus, more righteous; “mature and complete.”
- C. So we’re in a pickle! Despite our fighting we can’t get what we want from the other person and despite our praying we can’t get it from God. *Aaaarrgh! This is so frustrating!!*
- D. This is the kind of trial that tests our faith. The toughest trials in life are not always difficult circumstances. The toughest trial is the hand-to-hand combat in my very own heart. **Our worst trials are often the war within us.** But this is where we can meet God. Here is where faith grows.

God has shown us “*what causes conflicts and quarrels among us.*”
But what do we do about it?

III. PEACEMAKERS BEGIN WITHIN

In the verses just before this, God taught us that real wisdom acts out of humility. **Jas 3:17-18...**

A. Now here in **vv.2-3** James has criticized how we pray. But there is one thing we can ask of God that he is sure to give us. Remember what it is? When we're under pressure God welcomes our prayer for wisdom. And wisdom, as we saw last week, always starts with our humility. With God's help we have to drain the toxic sludge of envy and selfish ambition within us. Then we can face disagreements and frustrations with other people without bloodshed, without fighting and quarrels. In fact, as **3:17** said, the humble wisdom God gives us is “*peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*” Not a bloody nose in sight!

B. James' thought doesn't end here at 4:3. These next verses will be our text next Sunday so for now, I will just read them. There is a rebuke here that is so sharp it almost makes us blush. And there is grace! We are welcomed into God's presence where the humble always find the Father's love and help. **Vv.4-10....**

Illus.: Max Lucado writes about a big, muscle-bound man named **Daniel** whom he knew in Brazil. Daniel had been a weightlifter and fighter. Daniel's own brother swindled him; stole a huge sum of money from him. Daniel vowed that if he ever saw him again he would break his neck.

A few months later Daniel became a Christian. Even so, he just couldn't forgive his brother. As Lucado writes, “*The wound was deep. The pot of revenge still simmered. He didn't see his brother for two years.*” Then one day, the inevitable encounter happened—on a busy avenue in Porte Alegre, Brazil.

This is how Daniel described what happened: “*I saw him, but he didn't see me. I felt my fists clench and my face get hot. My initial impulse was to grab him around the throat and choke the*

life out of him. But as I looked into his face, my anger began to melt. For as I saw him, I saw the image of my father. I saw my father's eyes. I saw my father's look. I saw my father's expression. And as I saw my father in his face, my enemy once again became my brother."

The brother found himself wrapped in those big arms—but in a hug. And the two brothers stood in the middle of the river of people and wept.

Daniel's words bear repeating: "*When I saw the image of my father in his face, my enemy became my brother.*" [#2773, Max Lucado, *The Applause of Heaven*, (Word, 1990), pp.114-116.]

Daniel's fight was over and he had grown wise.

ⁱ R. M. Schneiderman, "Flock Is Now a Fight Team in Some Ministries," *New York Times.com/2010/02/02fight.html*, 2/2/10