**Marriage Core Seminar**

Week #7: Conflict

**I. Introduction**

Why do we fight most with the people we love most? That’s a question that’s befuddled generations of marriages. Maybe it’s because of the vulnerability of marriage which, though sweet when handled well—is terrible if not. Maybe it’s the one fleshness of marriage—that makes everything in marriage so personal. Or that in marriage you can’t hide. You can hide your critical thoughts from your officemates by keeping a straight face but your spouse will see right through that. Maybe it’s because you really do love your spouse and you’re willing to fight to do what’s best.

I find it interesting that so many of the answers to my question—why we fight most with those we love most—have their roots in God’s good design for marriage. Vulnerability. One flesh. Someone who knows you. Someone who loves you. Yet conflict in marriage is the worst. For many, there’s no lonelier place in this world than a fight with your spouse.

Our goal today is to think biblically about marital conflict. I’ll start by using what we’ve already covered in this core seminar to articulate some goals for conflict. And then we’re going to walk through the opening verses of James 4 to think about how we should approach conflict.

So first:

**II. Biblical Goals of Conflict**

The last few weeks, we’ve talked about how the purpose of marriage is not found so much in the things it produces—like kids and sex and companionship and ministry—but in what it portrays about the goodness and glory of God. Well, as you can imagine, that goal is also true of conflict. The Biblical goal of conflict is not to avoid it, and it’s certainly not to win it. Instead, it’s three things:

1. We want to work well through conflict. In a fallen world, conflict is inevitable. But if marriage is to show off how good God is, then *how* we fight matters, not just what the outcome is. Solomon writes: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Prov 15:1). Gracious words facilitate communication, even during conflict; harsh words make it worse. But more significantly, gracious words reflect a gracious God; harsh words lie about him.
2. We want to grow in wisdom. One difference between good and bad marriages is not that good marriages don’t experience conflict. The difference is that good marriages know how to handle their fights in a way that honors God. So we want to grow in wisdom.
3. We want to pursue peace. When the church in Corinth was in conflict, Paul exhorted them toward peace because “God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (1 Cor. 14:33). That matters because as a church, they represent God. Similarly, in marriage we pursue peace because marriage represents God. Not a false and icy peace but peace that’s warm and strong.

One thing I should point out is that very often, conflict is a necessary step toward true peace. Sometimes we fail in conflict by making it explosive and argumentative. But sometimes we fail in conflict by wrongly avoiding it. Especially for a husband, you’ll need the courage to initiate conversations that you know might start a fight. When you do, think carefully about timing and circumstances. Maybe you tell her in advance what you need to talk about. Pray about it. Make sure you have enough time. And the right time: not when you’re stressed or exhausted by other things in life. Be deliberate about what you talk about, and when.

So then, with that as our goal for conflict, how do we get there? Let’s turn to James chapter 4 where James describes the inner workings of conflict. His goal is for the faith in our hearts to show itself in action (2:17). And being a good student of Jesus, he knows that very often the action that most shows the true condition of our hearts is in what we say. James 1:26, “if anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, his person’s religion is worthless.” And of course, the time when we are most tempted to *un*bridle our tongues is in conflict. Which brings us to chapter 4. James breaks down a fight into several pieces, and we’ll take each one in turn. I’ve laid them out on your handout so you can see how this passage works.

**III. The Source of Conflict: Warring Desires**

James begins with a question, “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?” Which isn’t limited to marriage, but certainly applies there. What causes fights in my marriage? It’s my husband! It’s my wife! At least, that’s what it feels like. But James answers his own question. “Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder.”

Your wife asks you a question about the finances. You take it as an implicit critique of your leadership and that—combined with an undercurrent of frustration at how she spends money, leads to a snide reply, “well, if you paid closer attention you wouldn’t need to ask.”

This conflict started with a good desire: to be good stewards of what God’s given you and to be trusted by his wife. Nothing wrong with that. But in his heart that desire became a demand. Not just “I would like her to trust me” but “She *should* trust me.” Which evolved into a need “She *must* trust me—and it’s wrong if she doesn’t”. Which sets him up for disappointment when she doesn’t seem to deliver. And because this has become for him a matter of justice (“it’s wrong if she doesn’t trust me”) then he’s quick to react not out of love but anger.[[1]](#footnote-1) As James puts it, “you desire and do not have.” Very simple, isn’t it? So often, what we want is *good*—but this is not the way to respond to disappointed expectations.

So where do our fights come from? The passions that are at war within you. Wait, wait, wait…*all* fights? Yes, says James. All fights. So in a fight, James says the place to start is not with what your spouse said but your own heart. How often do you do that? Instead of asking “what’s wrong with him (or her)?” Ask “what do I want?” That is, what is the good thing that I want and how have I been deprived of it?” How much of this fight is me simply trying to get what I want?

The flip side is equally valuable in a conflict. Don’t just ask what *you* want; ask what your *spouse* wants. Here are three ways to seek understanding in the middle of a conflict:

***Listen.*** James encourages believers to be “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19). In a fight, *don’t talk over each other.*Instead, slow down, take time to really listen, and summarize back what you’re hearing, like Mark said last week. If you can’t summarize what they said (with your spouse agreeing that you’re hearing correctly) then you haven’t listened enough.

***Ask questions*.** Proverbs 20:5, “The purposes of a man’s heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out.”

***Clarify assumptions*.** One of the most dangerous things you can do in an argument is to assume. Assumptions often lead us astray because we read motives into a situation. With too many assumptions, you end up fighting with the person that’s in your mind rather than actual person in front of you. Two things to keep in mind: (1) *Don’t assume, but ask.* (2) *Put the best possible “spin” on any situation.* Whenever we make assumptions, our sinful nature naturally makes us think the worst. But Paul writes in 1 Cor 13 that love “always trusts” and “always hopes.” If you’re going to assume, start with the best, not the worst, at least until shown otherwise.

Part of clarifying assumptions is to work to not take things personally. Like the example I gave earlier about finances. He assumes that her question about their finances is an implicit critique of his management of their money. That *may* be true—but that assumption needs to be evaluated before he reacts to it.

*Any questions?*

**IV. Temptation in Conflict: Self-Protective Attack**

Of course, I haven’t commented on that very shocking word at the end of the last verse I read in James 4: “murder.” “You desire and do not have, so you *murder*. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions.”

What’s going on here? Well, James—like Jesus often did—is using hyperbole to get our attention. We’ve murdered in our hearts by hating and despising others. And we’ve certainly gone on the attack in our fights. That’s what happens when we move quickly from desire to demand to unmet need. What began as a good desire has now become (in our minds) an unjust deprivation and so we feel justified in going on the attack to protect our interests in the relationship.

So let’s take this temptation toward self-protective attack in two pieces. First, self-protection. And second, attack.

A. Your temptation in conflict is to focus on yourself. Your needs, your concerns, your wellbeing. It’s important to note that this temptation toward self protection is shaped by your position in marriage, as I talked about when we looked at 1 Peter 3 two weeks ago. Self-protective attack for a wife often feels and looks different than for a husband.

**Husbands:** per 1 Peter 3, your temptation is to lead in a way that’s oblivious as to where your wife’s at. And when confronted by that, self-protection most often looks like being defensive. You’re trying to vindicate yourself and your decisions. But instead, *your goal in an argument is to move towards your wife, seeking to understand just why she’s so upset at you.*Your first priority is to see it the way she sees it. She may not be right. The sin may be hers. But until she’s convinced that you are *for* her, until she knows that you understand her and are committed to her good, you’re not going to be able to lead her anywhere, let alone out of this conflict.

**Wives:** this isn’t easy for you at all. *In the middle of an argument, your desire is going to be to protect yourself from being hurt any further.* You might do that by withdrawing and shutting him out. You may be tempted to resort to guilt or accusation. Biblical communication requires that even in the middle of an argument, you remain open to him and invite him in; that you allow him to make his clumsy efforts at understanding what’s going on, and that you not punish him when he doesn’t get it as quickly or as well you’d like. And you do that through your trust in God. This oaf of a husband doesn’t understand at all what his inconsiderate comment did to you, but God understands. God has called you to pursue vulnerability with him, and God has only called you to do that because he will use it for your good. This means you don’t back away, but take steps towards your husband by using respectful and gracious words (even when you’re frustrated and confused). It means that you remain open to his leadership when he tries to identify and respond to the sin that’s been committed.

B. That’s the first part of our temptation. The other is what self-protection produces, which is attack. Generally, that attack is verbal in nature—but it’s attack nonetheless. You are at war with your spouse, and James’s language communicates that quite colorfully. You fight and quarrel because you do not have what you want.

For this temptation, we need wisdom from James 3, where he writes about taming the tongue. As we grow in Christ, we should grow in greater self control in a number of areas in life, including our speech. Solomon writes: “When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise” (Prov 10:19) and also “A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue” (Prov 11:11). A few thoughts on self-control in your speech:

* Don’t respond in kind. When someone says something mean to you, you demonstrate self-control by not responding to your spouse’s provocative comments. The best way to stop a fight is to choose not to have it in the first place. (Prov. 15:1)
* Pause the fight. When our emotions take over in the midst of a fight, we’re prone to say things we regret. Better for you to consider pausing the fight, cool down, and pray before you start the conversation again. Prov 16:32 “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.”
* Rely on the Spirit. It’s so interesting that “self control” is listed in Galatians 5 as a fruit of the spirit. You might think that holding your tongue is simply a matter of will power, not the Spirit of God. After all, the first word is “self,” right? But self control turns out to be evidence of the Spirit’s work in your life. Two things to take away from that. First, remember that there are two “selfs” at work. Paul tells you in Ephesians 4:22 to “put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires” and to “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God.” As you do that—saying no to one self, with the old, deceitful desires—you will increasingly find yourself able to choose the new self and do what is right. And second, you can expect that as you mature as a Christian and God’s Spirit increasingly controls your desires, self control will follow. Self control in that sense isn’t gritted determination but the power of these new, Christ-directed desires.

*Any questions?*

**V. The Turning Point in Conflict**

Let’s get back to James 4 and see where this conflict leads. Verse 4,

You adulterous people!Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

How do spouses in conflict become adulterous? Not because they’re unfaithful to each other, but to God—obeying the gods of self and vindication rather than God. Just like God described the idolatry of Old Testament Israel as spiritual adultery. It was fine to want the respect of your wife. But in response to not being respected, you’re berating her rather than loving her, and that means you’re following the god of respect rather than the God who made you. As a result, you’ve made yourself to be God’s enemy. And your escape, amazingly, verse 5, is his jealousy. He will not give you to another god. He will oppose you, verse six, until you turn back in humility to the path of life.

What’s your role in all this? Verse seven: “submit.” And that’s what I find fascinating. I think if I were writing this I’d say something like “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. So confess your pride and turn back to following him.” In essence, I’d skip right to verse eight: “draw near to God.” But the problem is that in the heady emotion of conflict, we can’t see our sin. All we can see is that we’ve been wronged and we want to be vindicated. If I interrupted you in the middle of a fight and said, “Cut it out, stop fighting and confess your sin”—you could probably honestly answer, “I don’t see any sin to confess.” This fight is because *he* sinned or *she* sinned.

So James is less subtle. When you’re in a fight, submit yourself to God. You can’t see the sin that caused the fight, at least not yet. But you know you’re not doing things his way. So submit. Determine to do whatever his word tells you to do, including how to fight. That is your first and indispensable step toward seeing your own part in this conflict. “Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

A few implications of this:

**Obey what you can see.** Typically in a aftermath of a fight, you’ll learn a lot about the ways you threw gasoline on the fire. Lots of things to confess in hindsight that you can’t possibly address in the middle of the fight because you can’t see them. But even in the middle of the fight, there are likely a few things you know you should do that you’re not doing. Stop yelling. Repent of that desire to get even. You may not be able to address *all* of your sin in the middle of the fight, but resolve that you will repent of whatever you see.

**Don’t indulge your sin and create greater distance in the marriage.** For those of you who let your anger stew for a day or more; or you respond to a fight by punishing your spouse with the silent treatment or emotionally withdrawing; you *must* consider how that compounds the fight and makes things much worse. Paul warns us in Gal 5:13 to not indulge the sinful nature, but to serve one another in love. When the fight carries over not just all day, but maybe even the next day or the next week, you are indulging your sin and letting it ruin the relationship. The operative word in Gal. 5:13 is “indulge.” When you indulge your sin, you actively let it fester and grow. There’s no magic formula to this. The quicker you submit yourself to God, flee your sin, and actively pursue your spouse in love, the quicker you can defuse the conflict.

**Hit the pause button.** Sometimes submission means stepping back to evaluate what’s going on. One of the great myths of fighting is that you must resolve things *right away.* Sometimes it’s our own desire for vindication that demands that. Sometimes it’s a misunderstanding of Ephesians 4:26 that says, “Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” While the general principle is to get the conflict over with as soon as possible, this shouldn’t be taken as an absolute law. Very often, it’s good to give each other space to cool off, to search the Scriptures and pray, and give your emotions a rest. And then come back together again and reconsider the issue. Get some sleep and reapproach the conversation the next day, rather fighting until 2 in the morning. But, if you take a break, don’t use it as an excuse to stew in self-righteousness or to procrastinate. The goal is reconciliation.

**Ask for help**. Sometimes—for big fights—submission means the humbling step of letting others in on your struggles. Shame makes us embarrassed to tell others; and lies pop into our head like, “The pastor will think poorly of me when he hears this” or “You should be able to deal with this problem without help.” Show humility and draw others in—your small group leader, another couple you know at church, or a pastor. Marriages don’t prosper on deserted islands. Every husband and wife should have at least one friend of the same gender who they’re talking with regularly for accountability and fellowship, which includes talking about how your marriage is going.

*Any questions?*

**VI. Resolution of Conflict**

In James 4, resolution of conflict is resolution of conflict both with God and with each other. Verse 8:

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Isn’t that an amazing promise! No matter what you’ve done, if you draw near to God he *will* draw near to you. And how do we draw near to him? First, by agreeing with him about the nature of our sin, through confession. And of course, having confessed to God we also need to confess to each other. That’s where reconciliation begins.

I mentioned the other week that today I’d walk through the anatomy of a good confession. So here are four things a good confession will include, whether you’re confessing to God or to your spouse. It may not always make sense to have all four, depending on what’s being confessed, but often when you apologize you should include all four.

**A** – three things here: confess you **A**ction, **A**sk for forgiveness, and confess your heart **A**ttitude behind your action (Matt 12:34). That is, not just “I’m sorry for speaking harshly, will you forgive me?” But “I’m sorry for speaking harshly; I was impatient and entitled. Will you forgive me?”

**B -** use **B**iblical language to describe your sin. Generally the language *we* choose to use when we confess sin coddles our sin more than the language that Bible uses. So use Biblical language. Not “I’m sorry I was difficult.” After all, where in Scripture is “being difficult” listed as a sin? But “I’m sorry I acted selfishly.”

**C -** articulate as best you can the **C**ost of your sin to the other person.

As in, “I realize now that my being selfish embarrassed you in front of your friend.”

Being able to articulate the cost is huge. Very often the reason why confession and forgiveness fail to secure true reconciliation is that the person forgiving doesn't think the person confessing really "gets it". When you attempt to articulate the cost of your sin to your spouse, you probably won’t get it right. But in doing so, you’ll be inviting them to help you see more clearly what you did. That’ll be painful, but that’s how confession and forgiveness really do clear the slate for the relationship.

**D** - explain what you're going to **D**o by way of repentance / restitution

As in, I know this is an ongoing problem. I’m going to talk to the person discipling me so they can pray for me and start holding me accountable.

There you have it: the A, B, C, and D of confession. Ask for forgiveness, confessing your action and heart attitude. Use Biblical language. Articulate the cost as best you can. And say what you’re going to do to repent. This is so far from “I’m sorry I was difficult, but you really pushed my buttons” which I promise you will only throw gasoline on the flames of your argument. A good confession goes a long way toward moving conflict in a marriage from explosive to productive.

And in marriage, you’ll need to get good at this. I mentioned earlier how Ephesians 4:26 should *not* be understood—requiring that you resolve everything before the sun sets (which would give you more time to fight in the summer than the winter). Well, it’s important to finish by considering what it *does* mean. Keeping short accounts. Rather than bearing grudges, or letting anger fester, or immaturely stewing in your frustrations, start dealing with the problem. That could mean gentle correction like Mark talked about last week. It could be confession. It could be asking your spouse if you’ve sinned against them because things don’t seem right in the relationship. The more you simply tolerate the sin or prolong it, the more likely it is going to compound and get worse. So deal with it quickly. Which brings me back to something I said at the beginning: especially for a husband, you will at times need to lead your marriage into conflict, and through conflict.

So then, that ends our two weeks on communication. Next week, we’ll get to our third and final tool to pursue being one flesh in all of our differences. That’s the one-fleshiest of them all: sex.

*Any questions?*

1. The DesireàDemandàNeedàExpectationàDisappointmentàPunishment paradigm comes from Paul Tripp, *War of Words*, chapter four. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)