

**The Jesus Box**  
**Conflict: Personal and Social**  
*James 4:1-10*

**1. View conflict redemptively (vs. 1-3)**

- Lust (vs. 1)
- Self-reliance (vs. 2)
- Selfish motives (vs. 3)
- Worldliness (vs. 4)

**2. View conflict compassionately (vs. 4-6)**

**3. Pursue peace-making with great effort (vs. 7-10)**

- Submit to God (vs. 7)
- Resist the devil (vs. 7)
- Draw near to God (vs. 8)
- Reflect (vs. 8)
- Repent (vs. 9)
- Humble yourself (vs. 10)



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## The Jesus Box Conflict: personal and social<sup>1</sup>

If you could use one word to describe the current state of the world around us, what would it be? Sad? Troubled? Crazy? If you chose the word “peaceful,” I might call you crazy! I think we would all agree that the past few years have been difficult, and so here’s the word I would choose: “conflict.” It seems that no matter where you look, conflict is the name of the game. And over time, conflict can wear down even the most joyful people, and I think we’re all feeling a bit exhausted by it. Ultimately, the reason behind all this conflict is because humans – all of us – at our core, are infected with sin.

I’m sure you’ve heard the term that is used in counseling situations, helping couples who struggle, talking about “conflict resolution.” But I want to make the case today that we don’t need *resolution* (which is a solution to a problem), we need *revolution* – where we come to the place that we have an entirely different perspective when it comes to conflict, both personal and social. That can only come for each of us when we put conflict in the Jesus Box.

The reason we are calling this sermon series “The Jesus Box” is because too many of us Christians live compartmentalized lives; we have a Jesus Box, but we keep other areas of our lives separate from Christ because we try to manage them on our own, or we don’t want Jesus to change things. We’ve looked at our work box, our relationships box, the box of our stress and anxiety and difficulties, and last week we saw what life looks like when we put money and stuff into the Jesus Box. Today we are talking about putting personal and social conflict in the Jesus Box. By that I mean the conflict we experience in our own relationships, but also how we deal with the conflict in our society around us. We will see how we need to approach it, and we will gain perspective on those in our society who cause it.

We’ll do that from one primary passage of Scripture, and that is from the book of James, chapter four.

If you’re not familiar with who this guy James is, here are some fun facts: James was a real historical person who was a younger half-brother of Jesus. And despite having an up-close-and-personal relationship with the historical Jesus, church history tells us that James didn’t call himself a Christian until AFTER Jesus was crucified and rose again. By the time he wrote the letter that’s in the Bible, it was about 15 years after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, and James was the pastor of a growing church in the city of Jerusalem.

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<sup>1</sup> Source material: *Conflict Revolution*, Chris Anderson Mar 20, 2023, sermoncentral.com  
C. Jeanne Orjala Serrao, *James: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, 2010  
J. Michael Walters, *James: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Wesleyan House Publishing, Indianapolis, 1997

In that letter written nearly 2000 years ago now, James wrote to his church and asked, “Why is there so much fighting? Why are you in conflict with each other? And why in the world do some people’s lives seem to be magnets for conflict?” James decided it was time for a “conflict revolution” within the walls of his very own church, and this is the message he preached, which is going to inform our lives and the days we live in, and show us what it means to put conflict in the Jesus Box.

Would you stand with me as I read it to us? Thank you – standing helps us honor God’s Word and helps us focus on what it is saying to each of us, so please let this sink in:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

“God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.”

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. (James 4:1-10, niv)

This is the Word of God for the people of God and we can all say, “Thanks be to God!” *You can be seated.*

One of the beauties of the truth of the Bible is that it will hold up to any context, in any culture, at any point in time. And that means we don’t have to know exactly what type of conflict that James was specifically addressing. Was it marital conflict? Was it relational conflict among members? Was it conflict between parents and their children or between bosses and employees? Was it conflict with the Jewish religious leaders or the Roman Government? It was probably...all of the above. And so this morning, in whatever context we’re experiencing conflict, Pastor James wants us to see conflict differently. And the first thing he wants to do is to give us the tools to...

## **1. View conflict redemptively (vs. 1-3)**

Now that might seem like an odd statement, because redeeming something is generally viewed as positive, while conflicts are generally viewed as negative. But James is telling us that conflict is actually *an opportunity*. When you hear “conflict is an opportunity” you might be thinking “yeah, an opportunity to get revenge.” But here’s how James says conflict really *is* an opportunity. Conflict often draws out of us something that is not a good thing.

And if it does draw something out of us that is bad stuff, then it really is a representation of what's in our hearts to begin with. It's in that moment, when God uses conflict to expose our true self, we should see it as an opportunity; not to destroy the other person, but to redemptively realign our hearts with God's. After all, James lets us know that the issue in any conflict, is not really *the* issue; the real issue is what is flowing out of the heart. I've heard it said and found it to be true that, in 95% of conflict, the presenting problem is not the problem.

Look again with me at verse one:

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?” (vs. 1)

Notice that James doesn't even deal with external circumstances. The relational conflict you're experiencing is not because of the way someone said something to you, or because someone didn't give you something you thought you deserved. It's not because the person or the president or the government is doing something you don't like. James says it's because *your* passions are at war within *YOU*... there's no mention of the other party.

Don't ever be deceived into thinking that whatever you're fighting about is the true issue. James clearly says in verse 1 that the problem is on the *inside* of us.

I've noticed many times, when counseling people that are involved in conflict, they each will usually spend a tremendous amount of energy trying to get the other person or me to agree to their viewpoint on the external circumstances... because often they want to be *right* more than they want to be *reconciled*. They want to justify their sinful anger and unforgiveness. But all that jockeying for leverage does not negate the truth of verse one—that the reason I'm experiencing conflict is because *my* heart is not getting something it wants, or thinks it deserves.

Now is it wrong to want something out of my relationships? Is wrong to want to be loved? Is it wrong to want to be respected? Is it wrong to desire peace? *Absolutely not*. These are things that we ALL desire. So what's the problem? The problem is when my desires (even if they might seem “righteous” desires on the surface) – the problem is when they grow into self-centered demands.

There's a pattern of how this happens...here's the formula: Desire --> Demand --> Punish. Let me say that again. Now repeat it with me. And where do we see this? Look again at verse 2:

“You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.” (vs. 2)

Now if you're anything like me, you're probably slow to admit that you're being demanding. But look at the progression here. It all starts with a desire, but slowly that God-given desire grows into a demand...which we then call an idol. And an idol is anything I want more than I want God...to the point that I am willing to sin against the other person by punishing them through sinful anger or, emotionally shutting them out.

Let me make this as simple as possible. The clearest indicator that a desire has grown into a demand is to get my way and I want to punish you until I get it, or because you won't give

it. I want to punish you through harsh words or language OR by just shutting down and ignoring you because my demands have not been met. Let me give you some specific examples:

- Comfort – I desire comfort --> I deserve comfort --> I MUST have some rest and relaxation...and you'd better not hinder my ability to get it.
- Approval – I desire approval --> I deserve approval --> I MUST have your approval...and I'll make you give it to me.
- Control – I desire and deserve to be in charge --> I must have control...and will do (or say) anything to have it.

Now you might be able to think of other things to add to this list, but my guess is that if we paused right here and thought back to the last time you had conflict with someone, you would probably find that the real heart issue would land in one of these three categories (comfort, approval, or control). But here's the deal: no other human being can consistently and ultimately provide any of those things for you...not even your spouse, and certainly not your government or society. Only Christ can provide those things for you.

I've heard it taught that conflict is really the result of an identity issue. Because when I don't understand who I am in Christ, I often look to external relationships or things to provide these things that I think will make me satisfied. But here's a newsflash – your spouse, your best friend in the world, your favorite politicians – they are all terrible, unreliable saviors...because Jesus is the only one that can truly make your heart satisfied.

God has designed our lives to be lived out in the context of relationships. We've talked about that already – relationship with God, with each other, and with the world. It's the first Jesus Box issue we looked at. That's because relationships refine us, and sometimes that's by drawing out of us what really lurks in the dark recesses of our hearts (especially through the conflict that we experience in those relationships). Prior to the conflict, we either A) did not know it was there, or B) knew it was there but were satisfied with trying to manage it and keep it boxed up. But you cannot manage a spiritual problem. You cannot control sin; it will always control you. If you don't put sin to death on the cross it will put you to death.

When we consider conflict, whether personal or social, our first thought needs to start with ourselves. We need to examine ourselves and say, "Is it possible that the issue in this conflict is NOT you, it's me."

Consider if the things that you are demanding from the other person or society is really idols; if your heart has believed the lie that something you want from that person or the government will satisfy you more than Jesus, that's an idol. Once you begin to see conflict as an opportunity to weed out and redeem the ugliness in your OWN heart, a conflict revolution will begin to take place...because you'll no longer be expecting your spouse or friend or co-worker or politics to be a functional savior by asking them to produce for you what they have no power to produce—which is a redeemed, satisfied heart.

When I became the pastor here 16 years ago, the church had come through some very difficult times. The previous pastor left in a way that caused significant division. Some of the pastoral staff were either caught in it or contributed to it. People in the church were

choosing sides. I came knowing that I needed to try to bring healing and help the church move forward by being unified around a new vision of the future of our church and community. That vision is what we are still becoming. But not everyone wanted to let go of the past, not everyone wanted to move forward, and not everyone agreed with the vision of the church. Some still don't. Some left, some didn't, but most who remained have led the way in our becoming a missional church, which over the years brought to fruition things like our 5-year partnership in Guyana, eliminating over \$2 million in debt, including the last million in on year, becoming debt-free and doing the renovations we could so far, and becoming a multi-generational, multi-site, multi-language church.

During my first year here, I preached a sermon about the need to heal, forgive, take responsibility, and move forward. I said we all need to own up to our part in the division of the past by repeating after me, and I asked everyone to say this: "It was my fault." Most people said it. Sadly, some told me afterward that they refused to say it. They were unwilling to look at and invite God to reveal their own heart in the conflict.

Putting conflict in the Jesus Box means I will view conflict redemptively, starting with my own expectations and contributions.

Well, James wants this all to be more than just theoretical, he wants to be very practical, and so he actually gives us some warning lights on the dash.

How many of you know about the "check engine" light on your car's dashboard? I read about a "Check Engine Light Repair Kit" recently... the joke was that it was simply a roll of black electrical tape with the instructions, "When check engine light appears, tear off one inch of black tape and apply on dash over light." Problem solved.

My guess is that there's probably more than one person in the room this morning that's ignoring a check engine light on your dash. Why? Because it's annoying...and the car seems to be running just fine. But James is saying that if I don't recognize the desires that war inside of me, they are going to produce sinful results. In fact, he says, the check engine light is NOT the problem here – it's just alerting us to the real problem; a problem that we shouldn't ignore.

We probably don't have to spend a lot of time here, but let's run through these potential warning lights that James gives us.

One of them is in verses 1-2, and it is...

### - ***lust***

Look back at verse 1:

"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" (vs. 1)

Another word for "desires" is "passions" or "lusts." Lust is maybe the more accurate translation because my passions or desires CAN be a good thing. But lust is when something good has been twisted by sin, and that's what James is talking about. Lust is where a God-given desire turns into a consuming desire that destroys everything in its

path. And so we HAVE to recognize when these desires, even *good* things, begin to grow to such a point that I'm willing to sin in order to get something.

The second warning sign is in verse two, and that's...

- ***self-reliance***

At the end of verse 2 he says:

"You do not have because you do not ask God" (vs. 2)

...and he's describing prayerlessness. Prayerlessness is basically coming to the place where I think *I* have all the answers or can fix things myself (we also call this pride). And so verse 2 says that I'm ripe for conflict when I am guilty of self-reliance as evidenced by a habitual lack of prayer.

The third warning light is...

- ***selfish motives***

...in verse three:

"When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." (vs. 3)

In other words, when we DO come to God in prayer, we don't ask for the things that would bring him glory, but rather for things that will please US and make US happy. *My* desires become the center of my prayers. I come to God with a list asking him to sign on the bottom, rather than handing him a blank sheet and trusting him to fill it out as he sees fit.<sup>2</sup>

The fourth warning light in us is...

- ***worldliness***

...in verse four. Some of our older folks who grew up in the Nazarene Church decades ago can remember some angry sermons against worldliness, talking about the evils of movies and music and on and on...and the worst part about all those worldly things? They could lead to *dancing*. I'm not making light of the issue; the church had very good motives, but sometimes we aimed at the wrong things. In the words of Jesus, we were:

"straining out a gnat while swallowing a camel." (Matthew 23:24, niv)

Without a doubt, God IS against worldliness (even if the things on our list of worldliness aren't as major as we think they are). But the principle is clear – listen again to verse 4:

"You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." (vs. 4)

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*

So now James turns our attention to what's at the heart of all this conflict in our culture and society. Putting this in the Jesus Box should help us examine ourselves so we'll understand others and...

## 2. View conflict compassionately (vs 4-6)

Let's listen again to verses 4-6:

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." (James 4:4-6, niv)

James is revealing both the condition of our hearts and the desire of God's heart for us and for our society. Societal conflict reveals the problems of our own hearts that we've just finished talking about – that hunger for things that will never satisfy what we really long for, which is ONLY found in a relationship with God through Christ. Think about it: all the things that people are fighting about, burning buildings for, shooting each other over, are things that ultimately the government cannot provide for us – no matter which party is in charge.

I'm not saying laws are always bad; the Bible says that God uses the government to maintain order and to punish evildoers, so we should obey it (read Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2:14 and Jesus' words in Matthew 22:21). We should disobey the government when it demands disobedience to God, especially when it comes to telling people about Jesus (Acts 5:29). Otherwise we ought to pray for our leaders and live quiet, godly lives (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

Neither am I saying that laws shouldn't sometimes be changed; they are the means by which God protects the oppressed and delivers justice for victims.

What I *am* saying is that this warring conflict we are seeing around us reveals how desperately our society needs Jesus.

So when James says that "friendship with the world is enmity with God," he's not saying that we're *not* supposed to be friends with non-Christians and people who cause conflict – he's actually warning us to not value the things that the world values because they are idols that will never deliver. *When we see the level that some folks will go to in society to get what they want, it should lead us to compassion for them, prayers for them, love for them, and looking for ways to serve them and introduce them to Jesus.*

This is what James meant when he said that God:

"jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us." (vs. 5)

When James says that, here's what it means—real conflict is not between two people, it's between the idols of our hearts and God. And when we finally begin to understand this, only then will we see ourselves correctly and have compassion for others, which will lead to a conflict revolution.

Well, James isn't done. Now that we've looked at conflict redemptively and compassionately, he gives us an entire list of what to do next. Listen again to verses seven through ten:

“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” (James 4:7-10, niv)

Here's James' final point; when we put personal and social conflict in the Jesus Box, we will...

### **3. Pursue peace-making with great effort (vs. 7-10)**

I once heard someone say that there are only three kinds of people when it comes to conflict: Peace-fakers, Peace-breakers, and Peace-makers. Peace-fakers avoid conflict at all costs and often bury it...even if it's something that's still alive. Peace-breakers are prideful and power up. If they don't get their way, they blow up. But Peace-makers see conflict, not as an accident, but as an assignment to redeem the ugly things in their hearts and to seek the best for others. So James gives us the action steps to get grace flowing through our lives. This is how we keep conflict in the Jesus Box.

#### **- *Submit to God (vs. 7)***

The first step is simply acknowledging God's rightful place in your life. Or to say it another way— “stop resisting God.” Having learned that conflict is coming from the things *we* desire for ourselves, James seems to be asking, “Have you ever considered what God wants?” And so we embrace a posture of a willing heart under his rule.

#### **- *Resist the devil (vs. 7)***

Satan doesn't want you to ask yourself what God desires...he wants you to stay focused on your own lustful passions. James says that we need to realize that this is a real spiritual battle, and we can't sit back and pretend that conflict is no big deal.

#### **- *Draw near to God (vs. 8)***

This word, and how it used, has an Old Testament worship context. Daily prayer, worship, and reading the Scriptures are all part of the context here. Central to the strategy of experiencing a conflict revolution is a regular reminder of what God is like, which is why it's so important to regularly engage in corporate worship. You might not notice, but all the pronouns here *are plural, not singular*.

I've told you recently that the average Christian's monthly church attendance is 1.4 times.

That's barely more than once a month. We all ought to strive to draw near to God in corporate worship as a weekly discipline. We gather because, more than anything else, we need God. And notice the promise! As we draw near to him, he draws near to us.

- ***Reflect (vs. 8)***

In verse 8, we find phrases like “wash your hands” and “purify your hearts.” Again, it comes back to our own condition and whether or not *we* are in the Jesus Box. “Wash” and “purify” were the kinds of activities in the Old Testament that were part of the preparation for priests when they would meet God on behalf of the people. It's the same thing we must do before we engage a world that needs Jesus – a world that we are called to be priests for. And so the challenge to “wash your hands” means that we prayerfully ask, “What do *I* need to change? What behavior do *I* have that needs to stop?” And the challenge to “purify your hearts” means that we look inwardly at what attitudes need to change. And so reflection involves confession.

- ***Repent (vs. 9)***

James says, “grieve, mourn, and wail.” James turns the tables on our natural penchant for laughter and light-heartedness and calls for a moment where we are to “grieve,” which means expressing sorrow for what we find in ourselves and our world, and what we've become. To “mourn and wail” is not telling us to be depressed. Instead, it's a moment for us to mourn how easy it is for us to let our own evil desires spill out of our hearts and destroy lives (others and our own). Ask, “Will that statement I make or thing I do in conflict hurt a person? Will my words in that post on Facebook or X hurt *a person*?” (we justify it by turning people into groups of some non-personal “they” who are “trying to destroy our society.” Listen: someone in the news that does something, no matter how evil you feel it is, is *still* a person). Repent of that.

- ***Humble yourself (vs. 10)***

This is not only the last step, it's also a summary of everything in this passage. We said earlier that self-reliance is a pride issue. But the promise in this passage is that those who admit that they're wrong, ask for forgiveness, and acknowledge their need for help, are the very ones whom God exalts.

Let's wrap things up this morning by quickly looking back at verse 6:

“But he gives us more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor (*or gives grace*) to the humble.’” (vs. 6)

Who does he give grace to? Those that humble themselves. Those that put this in the Jesus Box. And what kind of grace is it that he gives us? It's an empowering grace...the kind of supernatural grace that you need to battle against the lies that your heart and our society tell you can bring you true satisfaction. Humility helps you to look on others with compassion so you can be a peacemaker.

So what do we do? First let me say that you will never experience God's empowering grace until you first experience his saving grace.

You need to know that no other system of religious thought, past or present, will provide the divine grace that you'll find in the Bible. No social or political system or ideology will save you. This grace only comes to us through a relationship with Jesus Christ, the son of God, who died for our sins.

Are you tired of conflict? I know I am. And sadly, conflict will never be eliminated on this side of eternity. In fact, did you know that the entire story of the Bible is a story of conflict—God is a loving Father who is waging war against sin and darkness, which are gunning for you, for us. But the good news is that Christ has entered the battle on your behalf. And with Christ as the center of your life, you have a Savior who fights for you – no matter who stands against you. No one is greater than Him. So the most important question today is simply this – do you know him? Do you have a relationship with him? Will you accept what he's done for you? Only he can change your heart. In a moment, I'll invite you to pray to him.

If you are a Christian, aren't you tired of the conflict in your own heart? The way that conflict eats you up inside, whether it's with someone else or in our society? Surrender this to Jesus. Put it in the Jesus Box and you can begin to view it redemptively and compassionately and be the peacemaker that the world needs.

*Benediction:*

Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. (2 Corinthians 13:11, niv)