

Fighting

James 4:1-12



Preparation: *Pray before people arrive. Ask for the leading of the Holy Spirit in your conversation. Read the scripture for today, and study Stulac pg. 138-156. Circle or highlight the discussion prompts from this study guide that seem to fit your group best.*

Beginning the group study: Pray for the Spirit to teach you about healthy conflict.

Read James 4:1-12

- What things stand out to you in the text from James?

From Stulac, (p. 130-131, 155) printed here:

“One of the saddest phone calls I have ever received came from an elder at another church; he barely knew me but was searching for help. His church was without a pastor at the time. The board of elders had interviewed a man and had voted to recommend calling this candidate. Only one elder had dissented, and he had asked his fellow elders to postpone action for one week of further consideration and prayer. The elders had agreed to this reasonable request. However, now it appeared that the one dissenting elder had used that week to begin a campaign of criticisms against the pastoral candidate within the congregation. The church became deeply torn with fears and passionate opinions. By the time the issue came before a larger meeting of church members, there was such rage and shouting that the elder who was phoning me said painfully, ‘I found myself wondering if these are Christian people. Are they believers?’ He was agonizing over his divided church and asking for counsel.

Suppose this elder could call a meeting of the congregation to receive spiritual counsel from the apostle James. The people of the church would find him a tough realist. We like to think of ourselves as wise, and we are quick to justify our own role in conflicts. But James is exactly the kind of counselor we need – one who will not let us deceive ourselves and who will bring clarity to the complex issues. For Christians who want to learn true spirituality, James cuts to the heart of the matter.

We will miss the point if we do not recognize the continuity of thought between the previous section and this one. James has just given his readers a sobering picture: the certainty of judgment and their vulnerability in that judgment because of the terrible evil they do with their speech. It leads to one of the most fundamental questions of life anyone must face: How can I hope to purify my behavior (such as my speech) when it flows from my corrupt inward character? How can my heart be changed from its selfishness? Is there any hope?

James’s counsel for the church goes beyond superficialities and guides the church into holiness in its internal relationships. ‘True spiritual direction [as from James] not only

challenges; it comforts' (Webster 1991:18). James is faithful to confront sinful motives and evil practices, and he is equally clear about the promise of God's grace."¹

Getting started:

- Sometimes we want an organization (apartment, church, college, family) to change because of our own motives. How can we submit our motives for change before God?

There is no denying our need for James' instruction. It's all too easy to find examples of churches plagued by selfish fighting and unkind judging. James helps us recognize the source of these difficulties is in our own sinfulness. James does this so that we may humble ourselves before God and find grace.

- James is not talking about disagreements – the healthy conflicts that should be expected in a church whose ministries are expanding. He is writing about earthly, unspiritual fights. Discuss how un-healthy fights are usually more about self-justification than self-examination.
 - Invite stories from people about what healthy conflict looks like.
- James suggests that we get into fights [in our communities of faith, as well as in other places] because of things we desire for ourselves. A good question to ask when you are in a fight is this: "What personal desire am I trying to protect or gain?"

In the book of James, *judging* refers to the act of setting oneself up as a judge and lawgiver. Often, we judge the motives behind someone else's words, their actions, and how they spend their money and time. James states that this form of judging needs to be confronted, and then repented.

- How have your underlying attitudes and motives toward each other contributed toward quick judgments? Take some time to lament and repent, either privately or as a group.
- Jesus addresses judging others in Luke 6:37-42. How might humility help healthy conflict?

Our "grace-reliance" is woven throughout the passage, meaning that we need to learn to rely on God; and God's grace gives wisdom to those who are humble. "Grace-reliance" is the most life-changing stance we need to learn. Talk about how fights produce a kind of evil because they express our self-reliance instead of our grace-reliance.

Repentance for our times of self-reliance will not be easy, but it is necessary. Through repentance, we grow, and reflect more and more of Jesus in the way that we treat each other.

¹ Stulac, George M. 2010. *James*. IVP Academic.



- In this week, choose to commit to one of these things in an intentional way: purity, peace, submissiveness, mercy, impartiality, and sincerity. Discuss how you can help each other commit to this. What ideas do you have?