



### **TEST NO.8: THE CONFLICT TEST**

To kick things off, here's a picture of one of the oldest Egyptian artefacts yet discovered – the Narmer Palette, dated c3100 BC. The first half depicts the first Egyptian Pharaoh, Narmer, about to clobber a man with a war-club. The other half shows a row of beheaded prisoners Nice.

In the intervening 5000 years, the world has seen peace an estimated 8% of the time (so around 400 years-worth), and over 8000 treaties have been made – and broken. And if you can manage to get beyond the latest stream of westocentric news reports, you'll see the same things are still happening today, in various parts of the world.

But lest we think this is just a problem for the world 'out there', James has a message for us 'in here', too. Let's take a look at his 8<sup>th</sup> test of true faith: the conflict test.

#### **Jacob / James 4:1-12**

Conflict is everywhere – wherever you look, in fact. You can see it in marriages. In families. In friendships. In communities. In schools. In the workplace. In the world. And in the church.

Hence vs1: "What causes fights and quarrels among *you*?" Even amongst Christians in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, there were quarrels and disagreements – think the 12 disciples, or the church in Corinth, or Euodia and Syntyche in Philippi. We don't know for sure what was going on in the churches that James was

writing to here, but it appears from vs11-12 that things were getting pretty spiteful.

So, how does James respond? He gives them – and us – a cause, a diagnosis, a remedy, and a prognosis.

**1) The Cause** (vs1-3). What's the cause? We are! To be precise, our desires (Greek *hedonon*, the origin of our English word, 'hedonism'), are. The desire to have, the desire to be right, the desire to be in charge, the desire to get our own back, is in some way the root cause of every war, every genocide, every murder, every relational breakdown, yes, even every church split. When we allow our wants to be the most important thing, we crave, we kill, we covet, we quarrel, we even try to convince God to agree with us! And even when we *do* seem to get our own way we feel empty, because we're missing out on *the* one thing that, deep down inside, we're all really looking for: the contentment that comes from putting God first; from making Him the main thing, not us.

So that's the cause – us. And then James gives us:

**2) The Diagnosis** (vs4-5). What's the diagnosis? I guess you could say it's worldliness: as in, behaving just like the world does. But James goes even further: he calls it 'adultery', which is an idea that goes back to the OT, where the prophets accused the people of Israel of cheating on God because they went off after the idols of the nations. Whatever label you put on it, the message is this: "Don't you realise that if you behave like this, you're behaving like other things matter more than God does? And that makes you an enemy of God." And then he adds this, slightly ambiguous, statement: "Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit He caused to live in us envies intensely?" I.e. the Bible says we're self-serving for a reason – because we are!

And when we go to war with each other, we prove it.

**3) The Remedy** (vs6-10). What's the remedy? Jesus is! As James says here, our sin might be great, but God's grace, His undeserved kindness, is greater. And that grace was ultimately demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus, for all of our sin, for all of our selfishness. But then James makes this point, in the form of a quote: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (Proverbs 3:34). God wants to do good to us, but to grasp it, we have to be willing to go with it, to work with the grain, to submit ourselves to Him. And that means we need to resist the devil, draw near to God, cleanse our hands, purify our hearts, mourn over our sin, and humble ourselves before the One who has the power to change us into the image-bearers He desires us to be.

I.e. we have to take the medicine God gives us!

**4) The Prognosis** (vs11-12). What's the prognosis? Left to our devices, not good. And to get that point across, James refers to the scenario that probably inspired this part of his letter in the first place: slander, or literally, 'speaking evil of another.' And in the context of church, that's usually how

conflict looks: not clobbering a person (though there have been some church meetings ...), but moaning, gossiping, backbiting, giving them the silent-treatment. And the reason this is such an issue, aside from the fact that it poisons our relationships, is that we are disregarding the commands of Jesus Himself, who loves that person we're dissing, and warned us to watch our language (Matthew 5:21-24). It's as if we're saying we know better than God – which we don't.

And that's why we need the Spirit to do His work!

### **The Score**

When relationships go wrong, our default is often to pin the blame on that 'other person.' Now sometimes that's legitimate, but more often than not, both sides are somehow to blame. To illustrate this, here's a practical way of looking at it - a short course in human relations:

- The 6 most important words: I admit that I was wrong.
- The 5 most important words: you did a great job.
- The 4 most important words: what do you think?
- The 3 most important words: could you please ..?
- The 2 most important words: thank you.
- The most important word: we.
- The least important word: I.

And it's that least important word that's often the main problem, the root cause. So much so that the Greek word for 'I', *ego*, has taken on a slightly different nuance in English – and a negative one at that.

So, what about us? Are we passing the conflict test? Or are we merely 'keeping a lid on it'? In my experience, lids only work for a time – eventually things boil over. We need God to change our hearts, and our responses!

So, to help us think about all this on a more personal level, here are some more, perhaps challenging, questions:

- What lies at the heart of your own conflict-zones?
- Would Jesus agree with your take on things, or not?
- What can you do to help repair bridges to people?