Sermon Series: Becoming conflict contrarians
Sermon Title: The Root Cause of Conflict
Sermon Text: James 4:1-10
Big Idea: Becoming a conflict contrarian starts with humbly submitting the demanding desires of our heart to God

Greet Live, Re:new, Café and web
So far in our series Becoming Conflict Contrarians, we have been talking mostly about unhealthy verses healthy responses to conflict when we deal with it in our lives. Today, we are going to look at a different aspect of conflict. Today we are going to get to the root of what causes conflict in the first place. Becoming a conflict contrarian requires that you not only understand how to deal with conflict when you encounter it, but it also requires that you understand the root cause of conflict. Open your Bibles to James 4.

[Illustration] – When Cindy and I first moved to Paradise we rented a really old house, I mean really old. It was probably built around 1940 and it was probably built in stages. It was an add-on nightmare, electric wasn’t code, the floor wasn’t level and there were cracks in places you could see through to the outside. During the first year we lived there, we noticed mold was forming on the ceiling of the bathroom above the shower from the steam. So, I cleaned it off with some soap and water and then gave it a fresh coat of paint. A few months later, we notice it was back and seemed worse. What I learned was that the only way you could keep that mold from coming back was to kill mold spores that exist at the microscopic level with bleach. If you don’t get at the microscopic level with something that can kill all the spores, it will keep coming back.

[Transition] - Conflict can be like that mold. If you only ever deal with the symptoms and you never get to the root cause, you’ll be cleaning up that conflict over and over again. You have to deal with the root cause of conflict or it’s going to keep popping out and growing worse. So, what’s at the root, at the microscopic level in conflict? The Bible actually answers that question in James chapter 4.

Read verse 1

1 “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?”

If someone were to ask you why there is conflict with another person in your life, most of us would probably answer…because of my boss, because of my mom or dad, because of my spouse or because of my neighbor. Have you noticed how easy it is to blame conflict on the person you are in conflict with? This is really common in marital conflict; the proneness is to think, “If he would just change, or if she would just change.” Our prayers tend to be, “Lord change him…change
her.” But James says the source of the conflict is not necessarily a “who” but rather a “what.” According to James, conflict is born out of desires of the heart. Desires that battle within you…within your heart. **Conflict at its core is a battle of desires:** Your desire battling God or your desire battling the other person’s desire.

**[Illustration]** – Water in cup, hitting it and asking why is there water now on the floor? Not fundamentally because I hit the cup…but because the cup had water in it.

Conflict erupts and with it all kinds of wicked stuff because as Jesus said, there is evil in our hearts. Our hearts are filled with all sorts of slander, gossip, self-protection, malice and greed. This is why James holds the mirror of God’s word up to our hearts and asks us to take a good long look at ourselves first. Look at your desires, your wants, expectations, goals, needs, wishes, longings, drives and pleasures. All these reside in our hearts.

As we become conflict contrarians, our first prayer impulse must be more like David’s, “\(^{23}\) Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. \(^{24}\) See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” – Psalm 139:23-24

Conflict contrarians recognize that when conflict emerges we must first look at ourselves, our attitudes, our actions, our desires. Because James is suggesting that **reconciliation begins by looking at ourselves** and our desires.

**[Transition]** – He goes on. When we look at our desires, we have to discern something about them. We have to pay close attention to the demanding nature of our desires. Obviously, some desires can be Biblically legit desires. But, James wants us to be on the lookout for those times when our desires become demanding desires within us. **Look at verse 2-3** - \(^{2}\) You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. \(^{3}\) When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

**Our desires can become demanding**
Here’s what James is saying: At the microscopic level, conflict starts with a desire…you want something. That might be okay. But, very subtly your desire can take on a demanding force to it. We not only want, but now we insist that we must have what we want. Our desire quickly morphs into a dictatorial demand

It might sound like this in your head: “I work hard all week. Don’t I deserve a little peace and quiet when I come home?” “I just want to have the kind of intimacy God intended for marriage.” I’ve worked harder than anyone else on this project. I deserve to the promotion.”

The flashpoint comes when our desires hit the wall of the other person and their desires. When the other person does not meet your desire or give you what you desperately want, you become frustrated and angry or disappointed and even despondent. And here’s the reality, this happens with people in our lives but it often happens with God. When we’ve been praying for something for a really long time and God doesn’t seem to be paying attention, Christian Psychologist and Author Larry Crabb said, “As hope fades, patient trust erodes into demandingness” (Crabb, Inside Out, p. 139).

[Transition] – Then, at some point, our subtle unmet demands of our heart become damning. In other words, our anger grows and then we begin to find ways to hurt or punish the other party in the conflict who won’t meet our demands.

Unmet demands lead to damning
Over time frustration builds to the point that we take the role of a godlike judge and we condemn the other person. We, in effect, punish them as verse 2 says here, “You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight.”

Later on in verses 11-12 James gives an example of this proneness to take on the godlike role and condemn the other, “Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another.” “...There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?”

[Transition] So far James has shown us that our desires not only “desire,” but they can also demand and damn. A further dynamic of desires gone awry is that they distort our perspective of life. Unmet desires leads to distortion.

Unmet demanding desires leads to distortion
[Illustration] – Several years ago up in Paradise when I first started doing more counseling as part of my pastoral role, I made the mistake, several times actually, of agreeing to meet with spouses in conflict separately if they didn’t want to come
in together or weren’t able to come in together. I would hear what was going on in the marriage from that one person’s perspective. Then if I could manage to get the other spouse to come in, I was often shocked at the discrepancies between the two perspectives. It was like they were not in the same marriage. This really confused me until I began to understand that our personal desires in our hearts can thoroughly distort our reality testing. In other words, our desires can distort how we see reality or how we perceive what is going on.

[Illustration] - There’s a good example of unmet desires leading to distortion back in the book of Numbers 11, turn there with me. I want you to think of Israel as married to God in the desert. One day on the way to her new home, the Promised Land, Israel accuses God of not providing what she really needs: After many days of receiving manna from heaven, Israel demanded, “Give us meat to eat” (v. 13).

If you were a marriage counselor and you asked Israel, “What is your marriage like?” At this point, Israel might have said, “If only we had meat to eat. We remember the yummy sushi we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, the melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But, now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!” (Numbers 11:5-6). Then kook at verse 18, “We were better off in Egypt!” And in verse 20, “Why did we ever leave Egypt?”

Do you see what’s happening? Israel is telling her story through the eyes of her distorted desires. Her desires shape and bend her perspective. If you knew nothing of her real history, you might have thought you were listening to an objective story. If you were Israel’s marriage counselor, you might wonder, “Who is this husband? Why has he taken you out of Egypt? And why does he refuse to take you back there? What crazy idea compelled him to take you away from so fine a home and force you to follow him into the desert? Surely your husband, the Lord, seems quite selfish and negligent, even abusive.”

You see, unmet desires can lead to distortion and selective memory. Think about what Israel fails to remember. She forgets the death angel passing over, God leading her through the Red Sea, the Lord providing her daily bread, and his promise to lead her to the Promised Land. The sinful cravings of her heart have blinded her to the gracious provision and abundance of the true God.

This is why she remembers the onions and garlic in Egypt but forgets the brick and mortar. She remembers the melons and forgets her slaughtered babies. She remembers the cucumber in her teeth, while forgetting the whip on her back. In reality, the fish she ate was salted with her tears. And her dishes of sweet leeks
were embittered by the toil of slavery. Here in Numbers, we see Israel’s desires blinding her to the truth of God.  (Poirier, The Peacemaking Pastor, p. 55-57)

Our desires can do the same thing, if we’re not careful. Far too often the deep demanding nature of our desires cripples our ability to remember God’s presence and his promises. Our demanding desires overshadow our ability to trust him to provide perfectly for us. Like Israel here, we can forget God’s faithfulness in the past. The negative gets magnified and the positive gets minimized. We look around blinded to all that God has done before. **Here’s the point:** One of the first things we have to understand when we’re in conflict is that we don’t always see well. Unmet desires can distort our ability to accurately perceive what is going on.

[**Transition**] – Now, in verse 4, James uses some very powerful language which is very revealing about the power of our demanding desires. Our desires can become our god.

**Unmet desires can become our god**

James calls the people, adulterous in verse 4. In other words, you have forsaken your first love and you’re having an affair with your desires. When we are in conflict with someone, we don’t think of ourselves as adulterers. But sometimes that’s what’s happening. We’re cheating on God. How? We tune out his desires and we obsess on our desires. What we love most and want most is for our desire to be met. We set our affections on our desires rather than God.

Think about it this way: Our desires become like idols or counterfeit gods. As gods, we give them power to direct and rule over us. We worship them, serve them, love them, trust them, and obey them. You see, idols of the heart get formed in us as we allow our demanding desires to become godlike for us.

[**Transition**] - Now, you might consider all this and feel totally defeated. You might be asking, “How can I keep this from happening in my life? How can I keep my desires from becoming demanding, damning, distorting and godlike?” Since, James is saying that demanding/godlike desires are the chief cause of conflict, how can we change our desires? How can we keep them healthy? James gives us some great news. **Look at verse 6-8b**

**HERE’S THE WAY WE KEEP OUR DESIRES HEALTHY**

**Humble yourself and God will give you more than enough grace.**

In the middle of a conflict situation where we’re trying to figure things out, this ought to sound like music to our ears. When noses are bloodied, hearts torn, and
eyes are full of tears – we need to know real help is available…help from God. The Bible says God is our ever-present help in time of trouble. He stands by to graciously provide all the resources we need to seek peace and experience peace from our side of a conflict. Grace here can be understood to be the practical equivalent of God’s spiritual resourcing power.

And James is clear it’s an ongoing gift. God gives an ongoing, never-ceasing, ever-flowing supply of powerful grace. He gives all that we need for putting to death our demanding desires and for restoring peace in our relationships. What an amazing and comforting truth. Know that no matter how demanding or damning, distorting or idolatrous we have let our desires become, *God gives grace more than sufficient to bring healing and restoration.*

To reinforce this promise, James quotes Psalm 3:34 which teaches that God actually sets himself in opposition to the proud who stubbornly continue to let their desires demand, damn and distort…BUT he gives abundant grace to those who humble themselves and own their brokenness. Why, because the humble are deeply conscious of their sinfulness and they seek to rest in God’s sufficiency.

Often in conflict we can get so focused on our desires and getting our needs and demands met that we either forget about God or we approach him with a demanding spirit. In reality, our prayers of passion are sometimes increasingly angry petitions we bring to God. After a while, when God doesn’t do what we have repeatedly demanded he do, we can push him away. We sort of marginalize him or shut him out of the struggle. And then we go off and try to force stuff to happen and fall into the Devil’s trap and things get worse.

But, here James commands the opposite; humble yourselves, submit yourselves to God, resist the devil, come near to God and he’ll come near you. One man said, “*The first step to learning humility is to consider who it is we think must change*” (Crabb, p. 157-148). Conflict contrarians realize they might be the ones that need to change. They stay humble, draw near to God and seek to submit to his leadership in their lives.

[Transition] - Having come before the Lord in humility, the next step is repentance. Look at middle of verse 8-9

**Confess before God your attitudes and your actions and be cleansed**
These verses describe the actions of repentance. Washing hands speaks of confessing your sinful actions and being cleansed. Purifying hearts speaks of
confessing any sinful or demanding attitudes and finding grace and forgiveness. There is profound power in confession. The word means “to speak the same as God already knows.” Confession doesn’t inform God of anything. Confession is your verbal agreement with what God already knows.

And there’s so much power for change in a humble, heartfelt confession. And James is clear that this again is sobering, spiritual work. It can be painful. It can feel risky. It’s often accompanied by grief, deep remorse and sadness as a person recognizes how their attitudes and actions have wounded others.

[Transition] - Next week we’re going to go into much greater detail on the power of confession. But, for now, I want you to notice what God does when we humble ourselves, draw near to God and come clean with our attitudes and actions. Look at verse 10.

When we lay our hearts before God, he will lift us up
The word here for lift is the word that means, “To lift up on high, to exalt.” It refers to God’s promise to restore “dignity, honor and happiness” to those who humbly surrender their hearts to him (BibleWorks Word Study Software, meaning of word “lift).

In other words, God takes peace fakers and peace breakers and develops them into peacemakers. He graciously pours out his Spirit and his healing and his strength to enable those with demanding, damning and distorting desires to be transformed into people of peace. When you lay your life in front of Jesus he will lift you and restore you into a person who keeps your desires in proper perspective, never allowing them to assume the focus of your lives where only God is to be supreme.

Questions to discern when a good desire might be turning into a sinful demand?
1. What am I preoccupied with? What is the first thing on my mind in the morning and the last thing on my mind at night?
2. How would I answer the question: “If only _____, then I would be happy, fulfilled, and secure?”
3. What do I want to preserve or to avoid at all costs?
4. Where do I put my trust?
5. What do I fear?
6. When a certain desire is not met, do I feel frustration, anxiety, resentment, bitterness, anger, or depression?
7. Is there something I desire so much that I am willing to disappoint or hurt others in order to have it?

**** a few peacemaker books available at connection café…11 bucks.