

"But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness... What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? 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. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. 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."

"What causes fights and quarrels among you?" (4:1) That's a good question! Why do we argue, quarrel and fight so much in our homes with person we loved enough to marry, with the children we bear and rear because we love them, in churches, in parliament, and why are there always wars going on between nations? Often the things we argue about are not that important at all, and often by the time an argument ends we can't agree on how it started or who started it! The top 5 lists of things couples argue about at home are always the same -money, sex, work, children, and housework. These are important things, but the important things also often end up being argued about.

The apostle James answers his own question in today's Bible reading.

"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it." (4:1,2) We quarrel and fight because we want something. Something is important to us. Important enough to argue over, fight over, even go to war over. We all have deep needs and desires, things we want, things we want changed, things we want from someone else. We have a desire to be loved, loved the way we appreciate it, we want our freedom, we want money to live on, we want a job, we want the church to grow, we want friends, and sometimes we just want to be left alone! A lady sitting on a plane back from Brisbane with me said "I just wish my husband would ask how my day went".

James acknowledges that we sometimes ask God for the wrong things, selfish things **"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. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures"**. (4:2,3) But sometimes our needs and wants are legitimate, good even, like simply wanting to be loved by being asked how our day went, yet we still end up in a quarrel or fight. How does that happen?

One of the most helpful but confronting aspects of the "Peacemaker" conference which every LCA pastor had to attend in May this year was to be told that conflict often reveals our idols, our gods. When we are in conflict with someone it is often because something very important to us has been threatened or denied us in some way. Something may have become an "idol" not just if what we want becomes more important than God to us but more important to us than another person.

It can be as simple as fighting over the remote at home. No one would say the TV is god, but when we fight over it and let it run relationships we have let it become an idol in our homes. Or when money causes arguments maybe we have let money and our idea of how to spend or save it has become god at that point, an idol we won't let go of, just like the remote. Or when it comes to sex we can let it become an idol, a god in our lives and it ends up causing unhappy relationships because we demand our partner give us what we want so much.

The first commandment says **"You shall have no other gods"** and Luther says this means **"we are to fear, love and trust God above everything else"**. When we quarrel and argue, whether in church or at home, where is God? Or rather who or what have we let become god at that moment, the idol we worship? What desire or unmet need or thing we value has risen in importance to a point where we are willing to let it affect and even ruin a relationship? Instead of fearing God most we fear people and things, instead of loving God most we crave people and things and attempt to get them and are cranky if we can't. Instead of trusting God most we listen to and trust our own inner voice more, and the desires and needs welling up inside us. C. S Lewis wrote *"We know that every natural impulse, however innocent in itself, may stand between God and us, and so become an idol"*.

When you are in conflict with someone, no matter how major or trivial, stop and ask yourself: What am I really wanting here, and why? Why is it so important to me? What am I afraid of losing if I don't get it? Am I leaving God out of things when I go to war over an issue? And if I have left God out of things then what or who have I let become my god, my idol at that moment?

Someone said *"Sin is what we do when we are not completely satisfied with God"*.

When things don't go our way we become frustrated, resentful, and angry and bitter towards others and even towards God. John Calvin said: *"The evil is not that we want something but that we want it too much!"* We let money, sex, our desire to be loved, even our desire for the remote control to the tele, we want something so much we are willing to ruin relationships to get what we so badly want. And we may end up getting what we want but we won't enjoy peace, because we have ruined that peace along the way, as we attempt to fulfill our desires.

And if we don't get what we want from someone we judge them, condemn them, accuse them, tell them exactly what we think of them, threaten them, and ultimately we punish them. What husband or wife or family member hasn't subtly or not so subtly punished another family member because they didn't get what they wanted! In churches we accuse behind people's backs and we punish by avoiding them or leaving ourselves. At the point of becoming accuser and judge of others who don't give us our way and what we think we need, we have put ourselves in the shoes of God, the ultimate idolatry. We have made ourselves someone else's' judge.

So idolatry that ruins relationships progresses like this: I desire, I demand, I judge, I punish.

What are the idols you struggle with most? The desires, needs, fears, wants, longings that may neither be right nor wrong in themselves but you have let control and affect and maybe ruin your relationships with other people? What have you done to get what you wanted? Where have you demanded, judged or punished someone because you didn't get your own way?

Facing and naming our own idols, what we have let become God and take his place that has affected a relationship, is not easy, it's is uncomfortable, but we are not left alone. James says you are never alone. **"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." (4:7,8)** And that is exactly what we do whenever we confess our sins, repent of them, just as we did again this morning. You heard an invitation to come near to God because he wants to be near to you with forgiveness, cleansing of your guilty consciences and to help you with your idols and your relationships. If idols are about overvaluing the wrong things, and so wrong worship, then repentance is right worship, because it values God and his word most. Psalm 51 says **"the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken spirit and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise"**. Admitting to ourselves and to God that we have let something take his place in our lives brings his peace, healing and new life to us. Admitting it to another person applies God's peace to the relationship. "I am sorry I let the remote ruin peace in the living room, I am sorry I let me need for sex ruin our marriage, I am sorry I let my fears about money cause the argument". "I am sorry that I let my remarks ruin the meeting".

James says: **"the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness" (3:17,18)** Jesus who died for us and who is our peace calls us to be peacemakers who sow peace beginning by letting God clear our own backyard of the idols that have grown up there. It means drawing near to God in confession and repentance, and it means with his help resisting the devil and his temptation to let something come between us and God and between us and others, and trusting God's promise that with his help we will overcome and can sow those things that maintain peace.