

From where do conflicts and clashes come?

There is a legend that in the year 1249 AD when the cities of Italy enjoyed independent status a soldier serving in the army of the city of Bologna deserted to Modena and took with him an old, broken bucket used as a water trough for army horses. Bologna waived her rights to the fugitive soldier, but she insisted upon the return of the bucket. Modena refused to return the bucket, and a bloody war ensued. The war lasted twenty-two years. Some say that the war actually started when Modena took the castle of Monteveglio from Bologna and the bucket was a trophy. Whether the war resulted from the loss of an old horse pail or the overthrow of a castle, the bloodshed and the atrocities that accompanied the conflict were real and serious. The records say that the bucket that caused all the trouble is still under the possession of Modena and is exhibited in the basement of the Torre della Ghirlandina, the bell tower of the Cathedral of Modena, in Emilia-Romagna, Italy.^{1 2}

The underlying reason for such a senseless conflict lies among the reason for all such clashes. It is as James wrote in his letter,

James 4:1 What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? 2 You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.³

While a bucket might be an odd source for conflict it is only one among many of the causes that human beings permit to influence their behavior. In the Garden of Eden God told Adam and Eve that they could not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but when Eve saw that the forbidden fruit was “good for food,” a “delight to the eyes,” and was desirable to “make one wise” she succumbed to the urge and ate the forbidden fruit. The consequences were catastrophic, not only for the original couple, but for the human race as well.⁴ When the Israelites invaded the land of Canaan and attacked the city of Ai they initially suffered defeat. God had placed certain items under a ban and the Israelites were forbidden to take them as spoils. But Achan son of Carmi greatly desired some of the spoil and he took it for himself. He said when confronted with his sin,

Joshua 7:21 when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar and two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold fifty shekels in weight, then I coveted them and took them; and behold, they are concealed in the earth inside my tent with the silver underneath it.”

The sin of Achan is only too common among the people of the earth. It occurs many times in a person’s life that they see something they want. The item is forbidden for one

¹ Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopaedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (p. 1574). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_of_the_Bucket

³ New American Standard Bible: 1995 update. (1995). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

⁴ Genesis 2:17; Genesis 3

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reason or another, but they greatly desire it. And so they devise a method to obtain it, either by devious subterfuge or by overtly violent means. It was the sin of King David as he greatly desired Bathsheba the wife of Uriah the Hittite.⁵ It was the sin of Ahab as he greatly desired a vineyard belonging to Naboth. When Ahab asked Naboth for the vineyard Naboth refused on grounds of Levitical law⁶. When Ahab would have accepted the refusal, Jezebel his wife taunted him and that led to a plot to deprive Naboth of something that justly belonged to him. The result was Jezebel conceived a plot in which “worthless men” testified against Naboth that he had blasphemed so that he might be stoned to death and his property taken. This follows the pattern James pointed out in his letter, Ahab did not have the vineyard but he desired it, and the illicit desire led to murder.⁷

James said that the source of quarrels and conflicts was the “pleasures that wage war in your members.” “Pleasures” here refers to the desires for physical pleasure. Often these are sexual, but frequently they involve passion and desire for wealth, or luxuries.⁸

James said, “you lust.”

Lust takes many forms. The “lust” to which James refers has two principal meanings. It means to strongly desire to have what belongs to someone else or to engage in an activity which is morally wrong—those desires include, ‘to covet, to lust, to have evil desires.’⁹

Some churches use catechisms as a method to teach. A catechism is a summary of the principles of the Christian religion in the form of questions and answers. As it happened one day a teacher presented a catechism to some children by asking, “Which of the commandments is the most difficult to observe?” After a long pause one of the boys answered, “the first.” Then another mentioned a different precept. Finally, a boy of about twelve said, “The last is the most difficult.” This is the commandment which says, “You shall not covet.”¹⁰ The teacher asked, “Why is that so, my boy?” He answered, “Because, for one who is poor to see another possessing a great deal of money, and a great deal of clothes, and much cattle and rice, without wishing for some of them is very hard. I think no one can keep this commandment.”¹¹

An AP news story out of Chicago, Illinois, says that in April 2021 a court found two people guilty in the 2016 shooting death of the grandson of U.S. Rep. Danny Davis. The Cook County Judge gave each a 30-year prison sentence. Tariq Harris was 16 and Dijae Banks 17 when prosecutors alleged they broke into the home of Javon Wilson, 15, and

⁵ 2 Samuel 11:2

⁶ Leviticus 25:23.

⁷ 1 Kings 21:2-16.

⁸ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 291). New York: United Bible Societies. “pleasures” - 25.27 ἡδονή^b, ἡς: f: desire for physical pleasure, often sexual—‘desire, passion, desire for pleasure.’ ἐκ τῶν ἡδονῶν ὑμῶν τῶν στρατευομένων ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ὑμῶν ‘from the desires for pleasure that battle within you’ Jas 4:1.

⁹ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 290). New York: United Bible Societies. ἐπιθυμία^b, ας: f:

¹⁰ “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” New American Standard Bible: 1995 update. (1995). (Ex 20:17). La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

¹¹ Elon Foster, 6000 Sermon Illustrations, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1992, p. 148.

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started a fight over a pair of Air Jordan basketball shoes that led to the fatal shooting of Javon Wilson. Harris and Banks were convicted of first-degree murder and home invasion in 2019.¹²

What does the 10th Commandment say? “You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.” How did James put it? “You lust and do not have so you commit murder.” They coveted the Air Jordan shoes and that led to murder. Coveting is a grievous sin and the practice of it can lead to the most deadly of consequences. In the case of the Air Jordan shoes the desire for a trivial piece of footwear led to the loss of a boy’s life.

How many other people lust for the possessions of another person to the point that they would steal them if given the opportunity, or kill for them if necessary?

“Greed is good,” was the line spoken by the character Gordon Gekko, as portrayed by the actor Michael Douglas in the Oliver Stone movie, *Wall Street*.¹³ However, in spite of what Gekko said one would encounter great difficulty while attempting to find any good in greed. And Jesus said, “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed.”¹⁴

How many types of greed was that, Lord? “Every.”

There is the story of two men who suffered the agony of choice. One was a greedy, avaricious, covetous man; the other had a jealous and envious nature. A day came when the two came to the parting of the ways. A tempter said he would give them a parting gift. Whichever made a wish first would have his wish fulfilled, and the other man would get a double portion of what the first had asked for.

The greedy man knew what he wanted; but he was afraid to make his wish, because he wanted a double portion and could not bear the thought of his companion getting twice as much as he had. But the envious man was also unwilling to wish first, because he could not stand the idea of his companion getting twice as much as he would get. So each waited for the other to wish first.

At length the greedy man took his fellow by the throat and said he would choke him to death unless he made his wish. At that the envious man said, “Very well; I will make my wish. I wish to be made blind in one eye.” Immediately he lost the sight of his eye—and his companion went blind in both eyes.¹⁵

Thus is the outcome of envy and greed.

“you are envious” –

The Old Testament book of Genesis tells how Isaac, son of Abraham, stayed in the city of Gerar, an ancient city that lay south of Gaza. The Bible says,

Genesis 26:12 Now Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. And the LORD blessed him, 13 and the man became rich, and continued to grow richer until he became very wealthy; 14 for he had

¹² <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/crime/2-sentenced-to-prison-for-murder-of-congressmans-grandson/ar-BB1fCvnE>

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gordon_Gekko.

¹⁴ Luke 12:15.

¹⁵ Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (p. 290). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.

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possessions of flocks and herds and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him.

Frequently, envy arises in the heart of someone who sees the success or prosperity of another, and the envy gives birth to resentment and all manner of sin. The Philistines saw what God was doing for Isaac and they became envious toward him.

Sometimes a person directs envy at the person God appoints to bear His authority. The envious person in this case wants the authority for himself. The Old Testament book of Numbers tells about the rebellion of Korah. It says,

Numbers 16:1 Now Korah the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took action, 2 and they rose up before Moses, together with some of the sons of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, chosen in the assembly, men of renown.3 They assembled together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, “You have gone far enough, for all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?” 4 When Moses heard this, he fell on his face;

These men envied the authority that God had given to Moses. God’s punishment was swift. The result of their sin was that the earth opened and swallowed them and they all went down to Sheol alive.

As the legend goes, the ancient Greek Theagenes was a great athlete who won many contests in the Greek games. Following his death, the people of Thasos memorialized Theagenes with a bronze statue. Allegedly, a man who never won a match against Theagenes was so envious against him that he came every night to the statue and beat upon it to destroy it. One night, after repeated efforts to accomplish its destruction the statue came loose. It fell on the angry opponent, and killed him.¹⁶

And so it happens frequently as in the case of the opponent of Theagenes and the opponents of Moses that the outcome of envy is the death of the envious person.

“you do not have” –

Some years ago the ship *Shanunga*, on her way from Liverpool to New York, collided with a Swedish barque named *Iduna*, from Hamburg. Foggy weather interfered with navigation, and after the collision the *Iduna* sank in about half an hour. The *Iduna* had two hundred and six persons on board. Immediately after the collision the *Shanunga*’s put out rescue boats, and, with one boat from the barque, picked up only thirty-four persons of the ship’s passengers. One hundred and seventy-two persons, including the master, Captain Moberg, were lost.

Captain Patten, of the *Shanunga*, in narrating the catastrophe, said that no statement could exaggerate the horrors of that awful moment. All the survivors that were saved were picked up from the surface of the water. One cause why so few were saved was, almost all of them had seized their belts of gold and silver, and tied them round their

¹⁶ <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/Olympics/theag.html>

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waists. Thus those who attempted to save their gold lost both life and gold, being unable to remain afloat till the boats could reach them.¹⁷

The desire to possess or preserve wealth leads sometimes to the loss of something more precious—one's life.

“you do not receive” –

King Ahab was the son of Omri and the seventh king of Israel. He married Jezebel, a daughter of the king of Tyre. Regrettably, Jezebel was also an idolatrous worshipper of Baal. Ahab was deferential to Jezebel and to the detriment of Israel he permitted many of her wishes to be granted. Largely because of Jezebel's influence Ahab entered into a long course of wickedness and for that the prophet Elijah declared that his entire house would be destroyed as penalty for his sin.¹⁸

Ahab's attitude toward God and His prophet may be seen in his response to Jehoshaphat, king Judah, in regard to an attack on Ramoth-gilead on the east of Jordan.

2 Chronicles 18:6 But Jehoshaphat said, “Is there not yet a prophet of the LORD here that we may inquire of him?” 7 The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the LORD, but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me but always evil. He is Micaiah, son of Imla.” But Jehoshaphat said, “Let not the king say so.”

The Apostle John wrote,

1 John 5:14 This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.

It is clear that Ahab did not ask the prophet according to the will of God. Ahab hated the prophet of God because Micaiah told him the truth. The Apostle John also wrote,

1 John 3:22 and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight.

Ahab did not keep the commandments of God, nor did he do the things that were pleasing in the sight of God. Therefore, he did “not receive” what he wanted from God. Ahab died as a result of the injury he received in the battle at Ramoth-gilead. The scripture says that a certain man drew a bow at random and struck Ahab in a joint of his armor. So Ahab did not receive the victory his lying prophets promised; instead, he died of his wound and the dogs licked up his blood by the pool of Samaria. (1 Kings 22:1-40; 2 Chronicles 18:28-34).

“wrong motives” –

There is the story of the dog who boasted to his friends about his ability as a runner. “I can catch any rabbit I want,” he said. The others doubted his claim, but said no more. Then a day came when he chased a rabbit and failed to catch it. The other dogs ridiculed him on account of his previous boasting. He replied to their ridicule by saying, “You

¹⁷ Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (p. 833). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc. —*Preacher's Lantern*

¹⁸ William Smith, LLD, *A Dictionary of the Bible*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, p. 24,25.

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must remember that I was only running for my dinner, but the rabbit was running for his life.

As with the rabbit, your success in life depends to a great extent on your motivation.¹⁹

Not only is having motivation important, but having the proper motivation is even more important.

Luke in his gospel tells about two disciples who wanted to call down fire out of heaven upon a village that did not receive them.

Luke wrote concerning Jesus that,

Luke 9:51 When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem; 52 and He sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for Him. 53 But they did not receive Him, because He was traveling toward Jerusalem. 54 When His disciples James and John saw this, they said, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” 55 But He turned and rebuked them, [and said, “You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; 56 for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.”] And they went on to another village.

The disciples did not know that the motivation behind Jesus’ work was to save lives, not to destroy them.

The wise man wrote,

Proverbs 16:26 A worker’s appetite works for him,
For his hunger urges him on.

Mankind is motivated to work to obtain food along with the other necessities of physical life. But Christ said that there is another motivation that leads to even better nourishment. Once Jesus fed a crowd of 5000 in the wilderness. Afterward they came to Him for more food,

John 6:26 Jesus answered them and said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. 27 “Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal.”

Therefore, to seek the word of Christ is much better motivation than to work for a few loaves of bread and fish, or even for a banquet of Chateaubriand or a filet mignon, because the nourishment from Christ endures to eternal life.

The Apostle Paul was a man who began his life’s work with the wrong motivation. He wrote to the Galatians,

Galatians 1:13 For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; 14 and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my

¹⁹ Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (p. 862). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.

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contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.

Service to Judaism had become Paul's overriding motivation. Unfortunately, this service motivated him to persecute the church of God even to the extent that he attempted to destroy it. But when he met Christ on the road to Damascus he abandoned Judaism and embraced the motivation of service to Christ. Later, in his letter to the Philippians he wrote,

Philippians 3:7 But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul, at first had the wrong motivation. Later, he found the proper one. He met Christ on the road to Damascus and his motivations changed, permanently. After his conversion to Christ envy and covetousness were not among Paul's motivations.

Envy and covetousness are among the worst of sins and each leads to the worst of outcomes. There is no virtue in envy and "Thou shalt not covet" is the 10th Commandment.

Pilate knew that it was "because of envy" that the Jewish authorities handed Jesus over to him for execution. The authorities in Jerusalem feared that the influence of Christ among the people would exceed their own and they would lose their "place and their nation" to the Romans.²⁰ So, they arrested Jesus and brought Him to trial intending to have Him put to death. Predictably, what these authorities feared would happen to them happened anyway. Eventually, the Roman army under Titus came. They destroyed Jerusalem with its beautiful temple and the same Romans killed or enslaved thousands of the Jewish people. Such was the outcome of envy.

There is the story about the man who thought about little else than how he might become rich. A night came in which an angel came to visit him. When the man expressed his wishes the angel said, "I will grant you one wish."

Delighted by the offer the man replied, "Let me see the stock market quotes in the newspaper one year from now."

"I will grant you this wish," the angel said.

At once the man had the pages of The Wall Street Journal before him and he began to study them carefully. Here, he thought, was a means to buy stocks cheaply and to sell them for considerable gain. Thoughts of great wealth and how he would spend his riches filled his mind. As he eagerly read the columns of stock quotations his eye strayed to a side column. There in a memorial article he read his own obituary. Immediately, the importance of knowing the future value of the stocks in the market diminished.

²⁰ Matthew 27:18; John 11:48.

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Jesus once told a parable,

Luke 12:16 And He told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man was very productive. 17 “And he began reasoning to himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’ 18 “Then he said, ‘This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 ‘And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.” ’ 20 “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?’ 21 “So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

Josephus wrote in his description of Cleopatra,

1. (88) Now at this time the affairs of Syria were in confusion by Cleopatra’s constant persuasions to Antony to make an attempt upon everybody’s dominions; for she persuaded him to take those dominions away from their several princes, and bestow them upon her; and she had a mighty influence upon him, by reason of his being enslaved to her by his affections. (89) She was also by nature very covetous, and stuck (i.e., hesitated) at no wickedness. She had already poisoned her brother, because she knew that he was to be king of Egypt, and this when he was but fifteen years old; and she got her sister Arsinoe to be slain, by the means of Antony, when she was a supplicant at Diana’s temple at Ephesus; (90) for if there were but any hopes of getting money, she would violate both temples and sepulchers. Nor was there any holy place that was esteemed the most inviolable, from which she would not fetch the ornaments it had in it; nor any place so profane, but was to suffer the most flagitious (criminally wicked) treatment possible from him, if it could but contribute somewhat to the covetous humor of this wicked creature; (91) yet did not all this suffice so extravagant a woman, who was a slave to her lusts, but she still imagined that she wanted everything she could think of, and did her utmost to gain it; for which reason she hurried Antony on perpetually to deprive others of their dominions, and give them to her; and as she went over Syria with him, she contrived to get it into her possession; (92) so he slew Lysanias, the son of Ptolemy, accusing him of his bringing the Parthians upon those countries.²¹

Josephus described Cleopatra as an envious and covetous woman who committed the most abominable sins to gain material wealth, power and pleasure. She died of suicide at the age of 39 in her own mausoleum, accompanied by two of her handmaids.²²

The Apostle Paul wrote,

Galatians 5:19 Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, 21 envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy,

²¹ Josephus, F., & Whiston, W. (1987). *The works of Josephus: complete and unabridged* (p. 403). Peabody: Hendrickson.

²² <https://www.history.com/news/cleopatra-suicide-snake-bite>

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peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.