

Let Me Draw a Picture

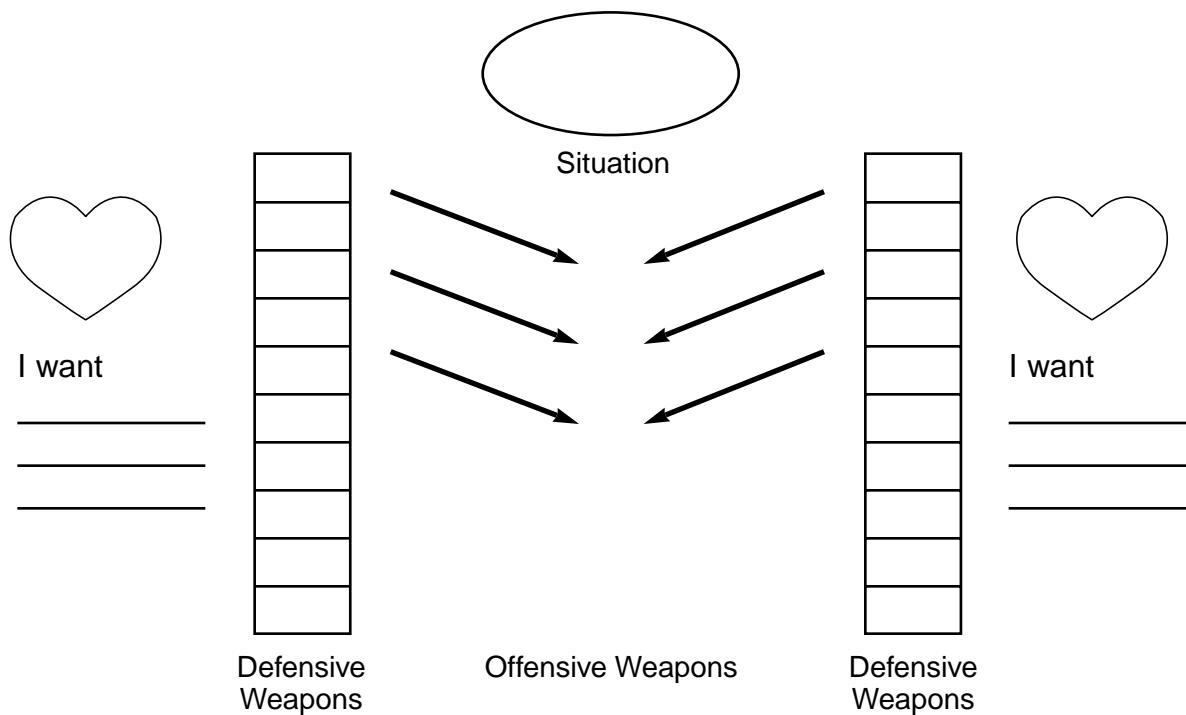
A good picture can make truth memorable and applicable. This new section features drawings used by counselors and teachers to communicate important biblical ideas to others.

Short explanations describe how and when the visual can be used. Reader contributions are welcome.

Picturing the Heart of Conflict

by David Powlison

“What Causes Quarrels and Conflicts?” James 4:1



I draw this picture¹ often in working with marriages and families characterized by a state of war. They usually begin quite stuck—the “Lockhorns” cartoon strip is all too accurate. The parties are often exactly that, overtly angry partisans in a bitter conflict.

They have nursed grievances, so bitterness and suspicion are longstanding. Each person is usually consumed with the offenses and unreasonableness of the other, and with justifications for his own side. Most feel hopeless about their situation (i.e., the other per-

¹I am indebted to Paul Miller for many elements in the basic structure of this picture.

son won't change) and are defensive about themselves (i.e., they minimize their own need for change).

The picture that I draw seeks to "capture on film" the dynamics of interpersonal conflict described in James 3:14-4:12. In the counseling setting, the picture does four main things:

1. Both parties to conflict are captured impartially. This works against both the prejudice and the fear of unfairness that inhabits most combatants. The very drawing expresses the "reasonableness and impartiality" commended in James 3:17, by capturing both sides fairly. It orients people towards peaceableness.

2. The diverse behaviors, emotions, attitudes, and thoughts of both parties can be noted in detail. People are different. Some people tend to "reinforce the wall" more than "shoot arrows," or vice versa. Some people's "arrows" are loud or violent; others use innuendo and gossip. The drawing gets real people and specifics nailed down on paper, rather than theorizing about people in general.

3. The picture moves people from the horizontal dimensions of the conflict to the vertical dimension. This typically comes either as a complete surprise or, if dimly acknowledged, has been completely ignored. Seeing how the heart is the *cause* of quarrels redefines the overt emotions, actions, and issues that play out. Various forms of "chaos and every evil practice" can be understood as expressions of fundamental sins against God (e.g., the dynamic portrayed in James 1:14f,3:16,4:1,4:11-12).

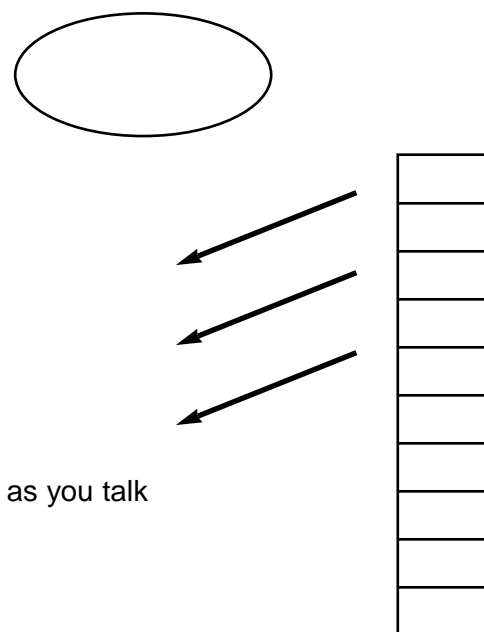
4. By deepening and refocusing the "diagnosis," the drawing sets up the grace of God in Christ (James 4:6) as immediately and powerfully relevant. The conviction the picture seeks to create is a bridge to transaction with the living God (James 1:5,4:6-10). Such true repentant faith is the only foundation for genuine change. Such a transaction provides the basis on which constructive, peaceable words, actions, and attitudes can then be built (James 3:13,17-18).

How do I use the drawing? Most often I'll draw it sometime towards the end of my first meeting with people in conflict. Typically, a conversation begins with the give-and-take of getting to know each other: questions, probing, seeking to understand, establishing rapport. At some point fairly early I want to move towards making biblical sense of what I've come to understand, and so help reorient people towards peaceable truth. In drawing the picture, I write down and talk about concrete examples as much as possible, perhaps dissecting a particular conflict that has been laid open on the table.

I'll often begin by drawing the **oval** at the top. In it I'll write the situations that trigger conflict. This could

include the time of day, or day of the week, or significant people, or what was just happening or is about to happen, or any other pertinent background factors. People often don't notice the common triggers. The situation oval also might include the "material" problem over which the argument occurred: finances, children, sexual relations, decision-making, relatives coming to visit, deadlines at work, etc. If possible, I'll be working through a "typical" argument, which usually involves a "typical" situation where people's buttons get pushed.

Then I'll draw the castle **walls** and the flying **arrows**. I may comment on war in general, or use a sports analogy. Conflict involves both offense and defense, both attack and protection, both sword and shield; tanks mount both guns and armor; soldiers are both aggressive and fearful as they head into battle; the instinct of the cornered raccoon (like the sinner tangling with other sinners) is fight or flight. In the bricks of the wall (or below the wall) I'll write down particular details of the "defensive" aspect of conflict: fears, hurt, avoidance, escapism, self-righteousness,



Draw as you talk

self-pity, unhappiness, brooding, compensatory addictions, despair, rationalizations, literal or figurative running away, etc. On the arrows (or underneath) I'll write particular details of "offensive" conflict: anger, accusatory words, violence, blame, retaliatory gossip, ingratitude, scowls, tone of voice, etc. The arrows work very well for capturing the exact words and flow, the "he said, she said," of a particular argument's anger and attack. The wall works well for cap-

turing what is going on behind the scenes in a person's mind and private emotions.

At this point, the piece of paper contains a fair bit of personalized detail. The triggering events or occasions are at the top. The many facets of "quarrels and conflicts" (James 4:1) have been personalized, and broken into attack and defense. Something of the differences between the two parties' styles of fighting is often apparent. We may even have captured the progression of a typical conflict, from how misunderstanding led to low-grade bickering and on to heated argument and violence. I'll continually check out the story with the parties present. The picture is a talking point throughout, and interruptions, questions, additions, corrections, associations, disagreements, comments are welcome. I might illustrate with an incident from my own life, if appropriate.

One of the charms of using an objective and impartial picture is that many times both parties buckle down to cooperate. Often they'll contribute willingly to filling out details of their own "walls and arrows," instead of focusing only on the other person's failings as happens during a fight. Some "openness to reason" and "impartiality" emerge in the warring parties during the very process of letting me get to know what's going on. With the picture this complete, I'll ask if there are any key ingredients missing. We don't need every detail, but I want to make sure we've grasped the general pattern. Often people are satisfied that their conflicts are accurately portrayed. Occasionally a bombshell drops at this time. "Oh, by the way," the husband visits prostitutes in the aftermath of quarrels, or the wife cuts her wrists and threatens to take pills.

Then comes the pastoral turning point. I'm going to insert the question, "Why do you fight?" into the mix. Most people's instinctive answer to this question asked directly is some form of blame-shifting. "I get angry and yell because my husband neglects me." "I hit my wife because she nags me." Sometimes I ask the question straight out in order to learn what these people each *think* causes their conflicts. But I have a different explanation in mind from that of the combatants. In any case, I'll introduce James 4:1 (sometimes paired with 1:14f): "Look how Scripture answers the question, What causes...? Why...?" James's answer exposes the human heart that inhabits the castle, the real you inside. I'll draw a **heart** in behind each of the walls and turn James's answer into a question: "What did you WANT when you got angry and got into a fight?" I want people to get as specific as possible. The concrete object of their desire identifies the craving, lust, or "pleasure" (not simply in the sense of crude, sensual hedonism, but in the wider sense of "what

pleases me"). This craving substitutes for God's lordship and issues in a lifestyle of folly. I'll show how the particulars of "disorder and every evil practice" that cover the page (and are described in James 3:2-12, 3:14-16, 4:1-2, 4:11-12) come straight out of particular ruling desires.

This heart-searching question can be asked many different ways, depending on the situation and the person. The language of "pleasures, lusts, cravings, inordinate desires" often would generate initial incomprehension unless explained (I'll want to explain it at some point, usually not immediately). "What did you want?" heads straight in with little ambiguity (though people's initial answers may be vague, partial, or evasive).

There are many other ways to put the question. I'll often start by using the person's own language. I might inquire about their "expectations" or their "felt needs," about their hopes, wishes, fears, beliefs, disappointments, loves, pet peeves, or what they'd like to see changed. People often speak in such terms without prompting. Pastoral counselors need to know *what* they are hearing when people use such language to reveal concrete information about themselves. You are hearing described—often in evasive, euphemistic language—the false gods, the lusts, the falsehoods that rule the heart.

For example, I recently counseled a couple whose lives were organized around the following "needs" and "expectations" that provided continual hot buttons for conflict. Both laid the cards on the table openly, though neither understood what the cards really meant. The wife "felt she needed" more tender loving care, more control over how her children turned out, more appreciation for what she does, assurance that her husband would not leave her. Her husband "expected" to save more money, to have his wife treat him with respect, to avoid doing any tasks he did not enjoy, to have his children keep out of his hair. Each of them also needed/expected the other to undergo a radical personality change to create the ideal godly husband/wife. Each of them, like every fighter, also had a strong desire to be proved largely righteous and to have the other proved largely at fault. No surprise, this marriage was highly volatile. The **heart** was easy to fill out in specifics.

One of the joys of biblical ministry comes in helping such people see how their conflicts arise from "encamped, dug-in, ruling desires," and how God promises "more grace" to those humbled to admit their selfishness. These were Christians, and they received the mirror's truth well, gaining a tremendous amount of hope and understanding even during our

first conversation. They began to get to the heart of their conflicts. They began to seek God's aid much more intelligently; when they sought, they found His presence and grace in previously unimaginable ways.

God does what He promises. They began to treat one another with humility rather than hostility. The atmosphere of condemnation and self-vindication changed dramatically. They began to listen more carefully and were amazed at what they learned, amazed at the discovery that the spouse was more of a sinner but less of a monster and more reasonable than they'd imagined. They prayed better prayers—James 4:3 is very searching in that regard! Both saw that much of their praying—the fervency, the constancy, the emphasis—had actually been in the service of their lusts rather than in pursuit of godliness and God's glory.

Here was the clincher: they began to talk more openly and constructively (a telling combination, for warmakers get more destructive when they get more open). They were able to talk evenhandedly about what each contributed to conflict. The "weather" in the marriage changed from bad storm to clearing skies.

Drawing an "oval, walls, arrows, and hearts" provided a tool for searching self-knowledge. It helped these people to stop and look in the mirror, seeing themselves as God sees them in their conflicts. That is radical self-knowledge. The drawing also provided a context for a pointedly applied Bible study. This James passage speaks volumes not only about the causes of war, but also about the ways of peacemaking. Scripture came to life for them—or rather, they came to life through the Scripture. The radical God-centeredness of both diagnosis and answer makes this passage a gospel pleasure. James 4:6 contains grace upon grace in a tiny space. If Paul had been writing it, he would

have headed off into the riches of God's grace in Christ, coming up for air six chapters later! James was more economical with his words, but there is nothing to prevent you from expanding on the meaning of "more grace," where that is timely for the people with whom you are talking. And James 4:6-10 is pure and simple relationship with the living and true God, our Redeemer. The Lord urges people to do what we so rarely do: ask, seek, and knock for what we *really* need.

Finally, this drawing becomes a homework tool. It helps people learn to work towards solving their own problems on God's terms. People at war can discover their problem patterns and can learn to take apart conflicts as they arise. They have a road map guiding them towards significant grace and significant change. No map can get you to your destination, but a map can picture the lay of the land, and so guide those with hearts humble to follow. Homework applications also set up future occasions of pastoral conversation. A record of conflicts both sparks joy at headway and reveals where more grace and work are needed. I talk with people about the benefits of "intelligent" repentance and faith: getting a clear bead on what's really wrong—inordinate desires producing sinful interactions—and grasping the tailor-made significance of the grace of God in Christ. People who see that their own heart is a bigger problem than their nearest neighbor's sins find the gospel immediately relevant. Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.

Your recognized need for help focuses prayer to God, gentles conversation with your former enemy, and sharpens the need for the encouragement of other believers. This drawing is a small instrument to encourage such good things.