

## JAMES 4:1–3

### WE BELIEVE BETTER THAN WE BEHAVE

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”<sup>1</sup>

James wrote one of the most pointed books in all the Bible. We Christians tend to either dismiss his words as not applicable to our own situation, or we are sufficiently disturbed by what he wrote to respond humbly to the Word. Whatever our reaction may be, few Christians are able to remain neutral toward James’ words.

James’ primary concern is that Christians honour God with their lives. Unfortunately, godliness does not just happen because we have trusted Christ. Godliness requires effort, and when godliness is lacking among the people of God, conflict results. James spends a surprising amount of time addressing conflict within the Body of Christ.

James addresses **Class Wars** within the churches [JAMES 2:1-9]—the case when a church confuses godly values with worldly values. He also addresses **Employment Wars** tolerated within the churches [JAMES 5:1-6]. These are conflicts that arise in part over the same issues that dictate class wars among Christians, but this has the added factor that power is abused so that the labourer is left at the mercy of bosses who act unrighteously though are part of the Body of Christ.

In JAMES 4:11, 12, we are warned against engaging in **Personal Wars**. Among the churches to which James wrote, saints were speaking evil of one another and judging one another. Here, we see an example of the wrong use of the tongue. Christians are commanded to speak “the truth in love” [EPHESIANS 4:15]. We are not to speak evil in a spirit of rivalry and criticism. If the truth about a brother is harmful, then we should cover it in love and not repeat it [1 PETER 4:8]. If a brother or sister has sinned, we should go to that one personally and try to win him back [MATTHEW 18:15–19; GALATIANS 6:1, 2].

James also wrote to warn against **Church Fights** [JAMES 1:19, 20; 3:13–18]. Apparently, the believers to whom James wrote were at war with each other over positions in the church, many of them wanting to be teachers and leaders. When they studied the Word, the result was not edification, but strife and arguments. Each person thought that his ideas were the only right ideas and his ways the only right ways. Selfish ambition ruled their meetings, not spiritual submission.

James is not forbidding us to use discrimination nor even admonishing us to avoid evaluating people. Christians need to be discerning [PHILIPPIANS 1:9, 10], but they must not act like God in passing judgment. We likely will never know all the facts in a case, and we certainly never know the motives that are at work in men’s hearts. To speak evil of a brother and to judge a brother based on partial evidence and (probably) unkind motives is to sin against him and against God. We are not called to be judges; God is the only Judge. His judgments are just and holy; we can leave the matter with Him.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

In each of the situations James addressed, one great, grievous result was the loss of spiritual vitality. The Christians caught up in the various conflicts James describes were not walking according to the will of God, and they sacrificed intimacy with God. In the text before us, James points out one other serious deficit resulting from the internecine conflicts among the churches—they no longer received answers to prayer. We believe what James wrote, but we believe better than we behave.

**THE TYRANNY OF HUMAN PASSIONS** — *What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?* The English word “passions” translates the Greek term “*hēdoné*,” from which we obtain our English term “hedonism.” Hedonism is the doctrine that argues that one’s own pleasure or personal happiness is the greatest good. Today, we hear the concept of hedonism trumpeted in the advertising assertion, “If it feels good, do it.” Obviously, the concept has great persuasive power since it is so pervasive throughout modern society.

It is a depressing commentary on church life that even in that early day James could write to a scattered people<sup>2</sup> and make the same general comment about Christians. Remember, the letter James wrote is perhaps the earliest book to have been included in the Canon of the New Testament. James seems to take for granted that the peace of the churches is by no means unbroken.<sup>3</sup> Tragically, hedonism—the pursuit of our own personal desires without considering the impact of our choice on others—frequently marks the lives of Christians as much as it marks the lives of those outside the Faith.

Even the most conscientious Christians struggle against desires that seem always at war within each of us. We tend to imagine that our strength and our abilities are absolutely necessary to build the church and to advance the Kingdom of God. We would never openly dismiss the necessity of including fellow Christians in building the congregation to which we were added by the Spirit of God, but we often appear to imagine that some among us are less essential, or even non-essential.

In fact, we sometimes think that we alone are indispensable. When we are miffed—when we don’t believe that we are receiving the recognition we deserve, or when we don’t “like the direction the church is going,” we say, “I’ll just stay away. Let’s see how *they* like that! Let’s see what *they* can do without ME!” We draw a circle that excludes almost the entire church, making ourselves into a congregation of one. Perhaps we imagine that we alone are pure, and those benighted saints who don’t see things our way will just have to be forced to do what *we* know is right!

Through such attitudes and actions, we injure ourselves and dishonour Christ; nevertheless, many saints persist, gathering a cabal to agree with them to wage war and to organise a putsch against those who fail to recognise their importance. When angry, we seldom consider the quiet, gentle members of the Body of Christ or those who are exploring the Faith whom we injure when we attempt to force the congregation to do our will. The congregation becomes increasingly unstable and weaker members drop out, but we persist. As we force the issue and the church is coerced through our unrighteous demands to choose sides, we notice that fewer people are coming and the Spirit seems to die. Nevertheless, like pit bulls we continue to force our will on the church.

<sup>2</sup> James writes to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” [JAMES 1:1]

<sup>3</sup> See Alec Motyer, **The Message of James: The Bible Speaks Today** (Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 1985) 141

“All our desires and passions are like an armed camp within us,” says Alec Motyer, “ready at a moment’s notice to declare war against anyone who stands in the way of some personal gratification on which we have set our hearts.”<sup>4</sup> Within the Family of God, there are ultimately no personal decisions that have no impact on the remainder of the Body! Thus, our own desires cause quarrels and fights within the Body.

My ministry among the churches of British Columbia has been primarily to factitious churches. Frequently, it was because a church had been choosing sides that I was asked to come. Factionalism often lies immediately beneath the surface; and we are as susceptible to this malady as any congregation. Since I have served in Dawson Creek, I cannot think of a single evangelical church in our fair community that has not suffered fissures in the fellowship as result of internal conflicts.

When we Christians have been ruled by feelings for such a long time, it is almost impossible to cease demanding that others accede to our desires. Consequently, when things don’t go our way, or when we imagine that they are not going the way we want them to go, we will retreat to what is familiar—permitting our passions to rule over us.

The tragedy of doing things the way we have always done them is what results when we have surrendered to our feelings. Quarrels and fights are the immediate result when we are ruled by our feelings. The reason this is so is that every member of the congregation has feelings—opinions and views; and the opinions all differ. Only as we submit to the reign of the Spirit of God is there hope that “with one mind” we will strive “side-by-side for the faith of the gospel” [PHILIPPIANS 1:27].

Though Christians tend to cloak our church fights in spiritual language, fighting among believers is nevertheless an outrageous evil. A church fight is a tragedy that can cripple a congregation’s internal ministries and external witness for years before a measure of healing and purification becomes evident. None of us wishes to admit that we possibly are at fault during a conflict, so we justify our actions by appeal to spiritual motives. Like soldiers during the Crusades, our belt buckles proclaim, “God is With Us.” However, we must bow before James’ stern words that confront our inward passions.

“[Scripture] says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands ... and purify your hearts... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

“Do not speak evil against one another, brothers” [JAMES 4:6-11].

Alec Motyer is correct when he writes, “All would be well except that in us ‘pleasures,’ ‘desires’ and strong longings are allied to, and at the service of, a sinful nature. Consequently, the sinful self, setting its heart on this satisfaction or that, will not allow anything to stand in its way... The condition becomes a practise.”<sup>5</sup>

If I surrender to my passions and personal desires, malice, envy, and hatred will mark my life [see TITUS 3:3]. The ultimate choice in life lies between pleasing oneself and pleasing God; and a world in which man’s first aim is to please himself is a battleground of savagery and division. Christians are not exempt from this dreadful malady. However, we must resist the temptation to surrender to our own desires, seeking instead to please the Lord. And what pleases the Lord is unity among the saints, time spent in His presence, and doing everything possible to build one another in the Faith.

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<sup>4</sup> Motyer, op. cit., 142

<sup>5</sup> Motyer, ibid.

**THREE QUESTIONS THAT MUST BE ANSWERED —** *Your passions are at war within you... You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.* James is not speaking of disagreements—healthy conflicts that should be expected in a church, especially when ministries are set to expand or when changes are occurring. Rather, he is writing about fighting among church members, which is “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” [JAMES 3:15] and he will excoriate those willing to engage in warfare within the church as “adulterous people” [JAMES 4:4].

James has already stated that earthly wisdom is expressed through “jealousy” and “selfish ambition,” and accompanying these evils are “disorder and every vile practise” [JAMES 3:16]. We should rightly conclude that conflict that advances a personal agenda is immoral and wicked. Such actions and attitudes stand in opposition to godly wisdom.

“With ‘you fight and quarrel,’ James returns to the point at which he began in VERSE ONE. We therefore have something of a chiasm in VERSES ONE AND TWO:

- (A) Quarrels and fights (v. 1a)
- (B) come from wrong desires (v. 1b).
- (B) Frustrated desire (v. 2a) leads to
- (A) fights and quarrels (v. 2b).

“The end of VERSE TWO therefore goes with VERSE THREE, as James explains why his readers’ desire to ‘have’ has met with failure rather than success. ‘You do not have, because you do not ask...’ What is it that James’s readers want to have? He nowhere says in these verses, but the context suggests an answer: the kind of wisdom that will enable them to gain recognition as leaders in the community. James has rebuked his readers for wanting to become teachers (3:1) and for priding themselves on being “wise and understanding” (3:13). They apparently want to lead the church, but don’t have the right kind of wisdom to do so. Moreover, James’s language here reminds us inevitably of his earlier encouragement: ‘If any of you lack wisdom, he should ask God’ (1:5). James attributes the failure of these people to gain the power and prestige they want to their failure to do just this: ask God.”<sup>6</sup>

When we Christians find ourselves embroiled in fights, we should examine what we are doing in light of James’ words. Here are three questions each of us should ask when tempted to engage in a church fight.<sup>7</sup>

**What is the fighting really about?** This is the first question we should always ask. The essence of sin is selfishness—the promotion of our own personal interests above God’s will. Eve disobeyed God because she wanted to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil [GENESIS 3:6]. Abraham lied in order to save his own life [GENESIS 12:10-20]. Achan caused Israel to experience defeat when to feed his own desire he seized some of the forbidden goods from Jericho [JOSHUA 7:20, 21]. The promotion of self-interests over the revealed will of God always leads to destruction and ruin. Isaiah was right when he lamented, “We have turned every one to his own way” [ISAIAH 53:6].

<sup>6</sup> Douglas J. Moo, **The Letter of James, The Pillar New Testament commentary** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2000) 184.

<sup>7</sup> The questions are suggested by George M. Stulac, **James: The IVP New Testament Commentary** (InterVarsity, Downers Grove IL 1993) 138-144

In the first verse, James uses exceptionally strong language—he speaks of “quarrels” and “fights.” The words refer to “armed conflict,” and “strife” or “disputes.” James appears to have deliberately chosen the former term in order to display figuratively the dreadful impact of conflict within the churches; hence, the translators have chosen to use the term “quarrels.” The latter term, “fights,” in biblical and extra biblical literature always appears in the plural and is applied to conflicts without weapons.<sup>8</sup> The concept conveyed, therefore, is that of arguments or dissensions. Undoubtedly, James chose these particularly strong words in order to stress the potential danger that results from conflicts that escalate to consume the witness of a congregation.

The instruction concerning the source of fighting can apply in home life as well as within the church; but clearly, the immediate concern is the church. When we fight, we console ourselves that we are fighting for high ideals, critical issues or injured rights; but James does not permit us to entertain such thoughts. He drives immediately to the point that fights are about personal desires. James does not specify examples of our passions; however, his words almost assuredly refer to group relationships, such as inflexibility about an issue as we try to have our own way, manoeuvring to assume authority, or criticising another. All such actions are immoral, especially within the church.

What is not readily apparent in our various English translations is that the verb James uses indicates that the conflict is ongoing. Though conflicts between Christians break out from time-to-time, our passions are *always* at war within us! We might tend to imagine that we have a battle between good and evil taking place in our lives, but it appears that James is saying that our own passions are at war with our very souls. In writing this, James is cautioning against the same evil Peter warned about. “I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” [1 PETER 2:11]. “James is not sympathising with the readers’ internal conflicts but warning that those who fight are co-operating in their own self-destruction.”<sup>9</sup>

**How do the desires lead to fighting?** We justify our role in church fights by rationalising the moral impurity of our actions. In JAMES 4:2, the Pastor of the Church in Jerusalem warns that our desires lead to conflict because of our own immorality in trying to seize what we want. Though the verb used [*epithumé*] does not automatically signify evil desires, the surrounding context indicates that the intent is clearly negative. Therefore, the New American Standard Bible translates the word as “you lust.”

In this verse, James seeks to state a cause and an effect. The second verse states, “You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.” His intent is to draw a definite connection between desires and behaviours. In effect, James answers the question asked in verse one by pointing to the strict correlation between desire and behaviour.

**What is it that is going wrong?** The origin of fights is identified as our own desires. Moreover, James has exposed the immorality of certain actions.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, we still attempt to justify our willingness to fight by claiming necessity. “I had to do that...” and we imagine what might have happened! This justification of our action is rendered indefensible because we have recourse to another course of action—prayer.

<sup>8</sup> See Kurt A. Richardson, **The New American Commentary: James, Vol. 36** (Broadman and Holman, Nashville, TN 2001) 172

<sup>9</sup> Stulac, op. cit. 139

<sup>10</sup> See JAMES 3:14-18

James previously stated two theological postulates that are vital to understanding the relationship between our actions and our prayer life. These presuppositions must be kept in mind at all times. The first premise is that **God is generous**. In JAMES 1:5, we read that we are to ask God for wisdom, for God “gives generously to all without reproach.” Moreover, God is pledged on His sacred honour to give the wisdom for which we ask.

The promise is reminiscent of Jesus’ promise given in the Sermon on the Mount, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened” [MATTHEW 7:7, 8]. You may recall that Jesus concluded His teaching concerning God’s goodness by testifying, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in Heaven give good things to those who ask Him [MATTHEW 7:11].

Therefore, when we read James’ statement that, “you do not have because you do not ask,” we understand that he is confronting us with the knowledge that our tendency is to resort to our own stratagems rather than seek what God has pledged He will give, perhaps because we know that God is not honoured through our requests. James is urging us to rely on God’s grace and goodness instead of resorting to our own designs.

A second premise that James has previously stated is that **God is pure**. James wrote, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one” [JAMES 1:13]. James also stated, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” [JAMES 1:17]. God will have nothing to do with evil.

So, when we read, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions,” James is warning that we may not expect God to answer prayer when our motives are wicked. He warns against asking “wrongly.” The Greek term *kakôs* carries the connotation of wickedly. One commentator translates the verse, “Your praying is corrupt.”<sup>11</sup> The wickedness lies in the fact that we ask in order to spend God’s goodness and grace on our own passions.

In the 1970s, Flip Wilson popularised the excuse, “The Devil made me do it.” We laughed at his comedy, but there is nothing humorous in the attempts of Christians to excuse the surrender to their own passions. James does not permit us to plead that church conflict is the result of demonic activity. In fact, never in Scripture do we find that demonic activity causes quarrels and fights. Rather, it is our own fallen nature that causes conflict and strife. When we are no longer submitted to the will of the Lord as revealed through His Word, when we fail to exercise faith, surrendering instead to our own desires, conflict is the result. Honesty and confession of sin will be necessary if the situation is at all to be corrected.

Desire that wages war against the soul is a very real situation confronting every individual. These desires must be confronted and routed if we will please God. Christians often imagine that we are free of these deformed desires within the fellowship of the churches. However, “the best a truly religious, devout Christian can do is to keep the body ‘in check’ [JAMES 3:2] along with the tongue.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> James B. Adamson, **The Epistle of James, NICNT** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1976), cited in Stulac, op. cit., 143

<sup>12</sup> Richardson, op. cit., 174

Pastor Warren Wiersbe has stated perceptively, “God made us a unity—mind, emotions and the will should work together. James has stated the reason we are at war with ourselves and, consequently, with each other.”<sup>13</sup> Our responsibility is to seek peace among the people of God, to do all that is possible to ensure harmony within the church. This is the teaching of Paul when he writes, “live peaceably with all” [ROMANS 12:18].

**THE POVERTY THAT THREATENS THE CHURCH —** *You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.* Canadian churches are incredibly wealthy. Our own congregation is generous. Whenever a need is presented to the congregation, and often, before the need is even brought to the attention of the congregation, people respond generously. It is an expression of great wealth, when compared to conditions in much of the world. However, there is one area in which we, and in which the whole of contemporary evangelical Christendom, are impoverished. We depend upon our own power instead of asking God to intervene; we resort to our own thoughts instead of looking to God.

How often have you heard someone facing a trial or a situation that appears overwhelming, say, “Well, there is nothing left but to pray?” Nothing left? Why do we not pray first? James has said that we do not pray because of our own passions. Perhaps you think he paints with a brush that is too broad, but it is difficult to argue with his logic.

***We do not have because we do not ask.*** The first need of Christians is to move past their own desires and ask God for those gifts that build us in our faith and that also honour Him. Without His help, we are not wise enough to find solutions to our difficulties. In our own strength, we are not strong enough to withstand the wickedness of the world about us. Despite our religious efforts, we are not sufficiently spiritual to understand the mind of God. Therefore, we must ask God.

I have frequently preached about the need for congregational prayer. I know that we pray, and I am certain that each of us prays throughout the week, recalling before our Lord the various needs that are brought to our attention during the services of the church. However, there is a great need for us to pray together.

We have received such gracious promises from the Master. He promised us, “Whatever you ask in My Name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My Name, I will do it” [JOHN 14:13]. He also promised, “Whatever we ask we receive [from the Father], because we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him” [1 JOHN 3:22]. The Master has assured us that we will glorify the Father through our prayers seeking honour for His Name.

The Master appointed us to His service so we would be fruitful; and because we bear fruit, “whatever [we] ask the Father in [Jesus’] Name,” He will give us [JOHN 15:16]. Clearly, the fruit that is in view in this verse is fruit in the lives of others, since Christ appointed us that we “should go,” turning others to righteousness and glorifying the Lord. This is associated with His promise, “If you abide in Me, and my Word abides in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” [JOHN 15:7]. Again, the child of God will win souls, turning others to righteousness and building them in the Faith through prayer.

In JOHN 16:23, 24, Jesus promised that He would answer our prayers so that our joy would be complete. Christians are expected to be joyful people, in part because God supplies that joy. If we lack joy in our service, it may be because we fail to pray.

<sup>13</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, **The Bible Exposition Commentary, Volume 2** (Victor Books, Wheaton, IL 1989) 368

God calls us to prayer, but before we will pray our hearts must be right. We must know the presence of His Spirit—knowing that we please Him and knowing that we seek His glory and knowing that we are obedient to His will. We must renounce dependence upon our own schemes to accomplish what we believe is best. Instead, we must discover what pleases the Lord, and together, seek His will.

*We ask and do not receive, because we ask wrongly, to spend it on our passions.*

If we do not ask because we are uncomfortable asking God for what we want, we must also remember that God is holy. Therefore, when we are at last driven to ask according to *our* desires, we are asking in order to spend what He gives on our own passions. God cannot do that which would sully His holy Name. As we pray, we must keep in mind that God is holy and that all that we ask must honour His holy Being.

The holiness of God requires us to honour Him through ridding ourselves of everything that promotes our own desires. We must seek His glory in all things. Perhaps that concept is not so novel, but it is difficult to implement. We are fallen people. Our passions are at war with our souls. Consequently, if we are not alert and watchful, we succumb to the temptation to seek what pleases ourselves instead of asking for that which pleases the Lord.

Repeatedly, the Lord God, speaking of His righteousness and of His holiness through the Prophet Isaiah, refers to His holy character. “I am the Lord; I have called you *in righteousness*” [ISAIAH 42:6]. “I am the Lord ... *My glory I give to no other*” [ISAIAH 42:8]. “I am the Lord your God, *the Holy One*” [ISAIAH 43:3]. Because He is the Holy One, we are admonished, “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” [1 PETER 1:14-16].

Prayer, offered in a spirit of unity as the people of God seek His glory, is powerful. Prayer, offered in the power of the Spirit as the people of God seek to know the mind of the Lord, changes the hearts and minds of those in the world about us. If our prayer life has grown insipid and flaccid, perhaps it is because we have succumbed to the temptation to permit our passions to rule over us. If our friends are no longer challenged by our godliness, if our children no longer find joy in worship, shouldn’t we pray for Christ’s presence and power, and for unity in the Faith?

One must be impressed with the observation of Pastor Jim Cymbala. “Anything and everything is possible with God if we approach Him with a broken spirit. We must humble ourselves, get rid of the debris in our lives, and keep leaning on Him instead of our own understanding. Your future and mine are determined by this one thing: seeking after the Lord. The blessings we receive and then pass along to others all hang on this truth: ‘He rewards those who earnestly seek Him’ (Hebrews 11:6).”<sup>14</sup>

It is time to seek the Lord. Let the people of God pray, joining hearts and minds to seek Him and to seek His face. May He stir us deeply so that together we will “discern what is pleasing to the Lord” [EPHESIANS 5:10]. With the Apostle Paul, I pray for each member, that each of us “may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” [COLOSSIANS 1:9]. Amen.

<sup>14</sup> Jim Cymbala, **Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1997) 167