

## CHRISTIANS AT WAR WITH THEMSELVES

### James 4:1-3

What is the source of wars and fights among you? Don't they come from the cravings that are at war within you? <sup>2</sup> You desire and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. You do not have because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup> You ask and don't receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your evil desires.

### INTRODUCTION

A recent news story from Wales told of a church that is now looking for a new pastor to unite its warring factions. It reads, "Yesterday the two opposition groups both sent ministers to the pulpit. Both spoke simultaneously, each trying to shout above the others. Both called for hymns and the congregation sang two; each trying to drown out the other. The groups then started shouting at each other. Bibles were raised in anger. The Sunday morning service turned into a bedlam. Through it all, the two preachers kept trying to out shout each other with their sermons. Eventually a deacon called the police. Two came in and began shouting for the congregation to be quiet. They advised the forty persons in the church to return home. The rivals filed out, still arguing. Last night one of the groups called a 'Let's-Be-Friends Meeting.' It broke up in argument."

This church tragedy played out where all claimed to follow **Jesus Christ**, who urges us, "'learn from Me, because I am gentle and humble of heart'" (**Matthew 11:29**). In **Luke 22:25-27** (ERV), **Jesus** told the disciples, "'The kings of the world rule over their people, and those who have authority over others want to be called 'the great providers for the people.' <sup>26</sup> But you must not be like that. The one with the most authority among you should act as if he is the least important. The one who leads should be like one who serves. <sup>27</sup> Who is more important: the one serving or the one sitting at the table being served? Everyone thinks it's the one being served, right? But I have been with you as the one who serves.'" It's one thing for people to disagree. It's another thing to treat people as our enemies or even as God's enemies for disagreeing with us, even if we're convinced they are opposing what God prefers. If a church no longer upholds the true Gospel, like denying **Jesus'** words, "'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me'" (**John 14:6**), we prove we are **Jesus'** followers by withdrawing from that church. If a church approves policies or actions with which we disagree but don't distort the Gospel, we show we are Christ's followers by submitting our will to the will of the majority. Some members of a Southern church stubbornly chose green for the color of their new roof; other insisted upon red. They came to a compromise: one side would be red; one side would be green. "Isn't that fair?" they all claimed. The problem is, their split-colored roof became a monument to an uncooperative, broken body of Christ, which soon split into two, separate churches.

In response to rivalries within the Church of Corinth, Paul wrote in **I Corinthians 1:10-12** (NLT): "I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose." Reformation leader John Calvin comments upon these verses: "pride or haughtiness is the cause and commencement of all contentions, when everyone, assuming to himself more than he is entitled to do, is eager to have others in subjection to him." In other words, we pridefully believe that unity in a church is best achieved by conforming others to *our* opinions; by claiming *our* opinions must also be *God's* opinions.

Factions can develop between church members or even in a church staff. In one church, as a story goes, the pastor and music minister used the Sunday morning service to spite each other. The pastor preached one morning on gossiping and watching our tongues. The choir director closed the service with the hymn, *I Love to Tell the Story*. Next week, disgusted over the insubordinate music minister, the pastor told the church he was thinking of resigning. The choir director immediately chose *O Why Not Tonight?* as the final hymn. This was too much! The pastor resigned the next Sunday, telling the church **Jesus** had led him there and was now leading him away. For the closing hymn, the choir director selected *What a Friend We Have in Jesus!*

## I. AT WAR AMONG OURSELVES

In November, we took our first look at **James 3:13-16**: "Who is wise and has understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness. <sup>14</sup> But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't brag and deny the truth. <sup>15</sup> Such wisdom does not come from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. <sup>16</sup> For where envy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every kind of evil." "Disorder" refers to the "instability, rebellion," or even "riots" we cause by overturning God's authority; God's principles for ordering our lives and society. Paul reminds us in **I Corinthians 14:33**, "God is not a God of disorder but of peace." We sacrifice the "peace" that comes from doing things God's way, and we resemble the Devil more than we do Christ, if we are driven by "bitter envy and selfish ambition." "Bitter envy" is better understood as "bitter jealousy." It refers to a preoccupation with the correctness of our opinions and a desire to promote ourselves that makes us resentful of sharing credit or attention with others. You heard of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) four weeks ago; Scottish historical novelist, playwright, poet, and the leading literary figure of the British Empire for many years. *Ivanhoe* may be his most celebrated work. Then the works of Lord Byron began to appear and their greatness was immediately recognized. Soon an anonymous critic praised his poems in a London Paper. He declared that in the presence of the brilliant works of this new poetic genius, Scott could no longer be considered Britain's foremost writer. It was later learned that the unnamed reviewer had been none other than the devout Christian Sir Walter Scott himself!

"Selfish ambition" describes what's done with a "What's in it for me?" attitude. Or it describes "partisan politics" that's ready to resort to any means, even unworthy and divisive tactics, to get its way. Instead of giving us something to "brag" about if we succeed in getting our way by such ungodly tactics, the "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition" displayed by our "heart" serve to "deny the truth" of the Christian conversion we profess. News had evidently reached James' ears that the "disorder and every kind of evil" unleashed by unrestrained "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition" had erupted into "wars and fights among" some of the churches to whom he addressed his pastoral letter. Words in **James 4:1-2** are frighteningly strong: *wars, fights, at war, murder, fight and war*. James expresses horror of the bitterness of the conflicts and bad feelings that can break out among Christians by invoking such warlike vocabulary. The Greek word for "war" describes prolonged hostility; "fights" refers to specific outbursts of antagonism. "Murder" in this context means if bitter quarreling is left unchecked, it could easily escalate to murderous thoughts or destructive acts.

How is such hostility possible among people who've humbly and repentantly confessed their sins to God the Father and cried out for mercy to His Son, **Jesus Christ**? James asks and answers this question for us: "What is the source of wars and fights among you? Don't they come from the cravings that are at war within you? You desire and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war." The NASB wording for **vs. 2** is probably closer to James' meaning: "You lust and do not have; *so* you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; *so* you fight and quarrel." If the "cravings" ("intense passions") to satisfy what most pleases us in a church—its appearance, honored tradition, pet doctrine, how money is spent, ministries, recognition we receive, etc.—are blocked, we may agitate, gossip, pout, rebel against leadership, or stir up controversy. This is not because we believe our church fails to faithfully present **Jesus** as personal Savior and Lord. We feel the church is not doing enough to embrace what most pleases *us*.

Many "special needs" children show us how little "selfish ambition" or "winning by any means necessary" really matters. A few years ago the Special Olympics were held in Seattle, WA. Nine physically or mentally challenged runners lined up at the starting line for the 100 meter run. At the sound of the gun, all the runners began to run as fast as they could. But "one boy . . . stumbled, out of the starting blocks." He fell down and began to cry. The other eight runners heard the boy crying and immediately stopped running and turned around to see what was wrong. They stunned the crowd by all eight of them walking back to the place where the boy was lying on the ground to help him back to his feet. One girl with Down syndrome kissed him and said, "That will make it better." All nine of them then linked arms and walked together to the finish line, which made all of them winners *together*; far more important, in their eyes, than any *one* of them

winning. Everyone in the stadium stood up and began to cheer. They gave them a standing ovation that lasted 10 minutes! Does this teach us a lot as Christians about the supportive love or unity the lost world needs to see from us? Paul wrote in **Ephesians 4:1-6** (NASB): "I, . . . implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, <sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, <sup>3</sup> being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> *There is* one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all."

## II. AT WAR WITHIN OURSELVES

It's no wonder conflict erupts, at times, *among* church members, because conflict is always potentially seething *within* church members. This is what Paul describes in **Galatians 5:16-17** (NLT): "[L]et the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions." James expresses awareness of this same internal conflict in **vs. 1**: "What is the source of wars and fights among you? Don't they come from the cravings that are at war within you?" As Christians, we choose daily, often moment-by-moment, whether to act upon the ungodly promptings of our sinful nature or the promptings of God's Spirit appealing to our new nature that has been "created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth," which the Holy Spirit birthed within us the moment we embraced **Jesus Christ** as Savior and Lord (**Ephesians 4:24; John 3:3-6**).

In **vss. 2 & 3**, James targets two ways Christians abuse prayer: "You desire and do not have. . . . You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and don't receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your evil desires." First, James counsels us, if "you desire and do not have," it's because "you do not have because you do not ask." We've failed to entrust our longings to God in persistent, submissive prayer. **I John 5:14-15** instructs us, "Now this is the confidence we have before Him: Whenever we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. <sup>15</sup> And if we know that He hears whatever we ask, we know that we have what we have asked Him for." Let's keep in mind we are speaking today about our lives within our church family. We should have enough trust in our Heavenly Father that our side, our recommendations, our desires will finally win out whenever these are also the desires that God believes should necessarily win.

Secondly, if you "desire and do not have," it's "because you ask with wrong motives" to satisfy "evil desires." "Wrong motives" derives from a Greek word the New Testament usually translates as "diseased" or "sick" (**Mark 1:32**). "Evil desires" translates a variation of the Greek word for "cravings" in **vs. 1**. We can become feverishly self-centered in our prayers—"my will, my will, my will be done"—instead of faithfully God-centered. The Model Prayer **Jesus** presents in **Matthew 6:8-10** begins with three petitions that stress God and His will have priority over our will: "[Y]our Father knows the things you need before you ask Him. <sup>9</sup> Therefore, you should pray like this: "Our Father in heaven, Your name be honored as holy. <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."" Genuine Christian prayer grows from a trusting relationship with our Heavenly Father, whose will we confidently affirm *is* and *should be* supreme.

## CONCLUSION

An American missionary traveled years ago across Korea by train. At a busy station an old man boarded and sat across from him. He addressed the American in his native Korean tongue. The American replied in the only Korean phrase he knew: "I don't understand." A few minutes later the Korean tried again, but the missionary could only say, "I don't understand." The Korean then tried a third question, only this time the American recognized a familiar word *Yesu*, which means **Jesus**. The American pointed to himself and said *Yesu*. The Old man did the same with a smile of delight on his face. The Korean then unwrapped the bundle he carried. It was a large Korean Bible. He turned to a page and pointed to a place he wanted the American to read. Remembering that oriental Bibles are written from back to front, the missionary took his own Bible

and counted the number of books, chapters, and verses from the back to find the verse to which the old man had pointed: **Mark 3:35** (KJV), "For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother." The American searched for a suitable reply. He counted out and pointed to **Psalms 133:1** in the Korean Bible: "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" The Korean man read it and smiled in agreement.

For the rest of their journey, these two men who were ages and cultures apart experienced the bond of a loving friendship as they pointed first to one verse and then to another of their own, well-read Bibles, which were inspired by the same Holy Spirit, and as they testified of their fervent, common commitment to their Savior, **Jesus Christ**. If we are as diligent to know our Bibles, as were these men, and to base all of our communications with fellow believers upon the truths of God's Word, as they did, what remarkable bonds of friendship and closeness might be possible among us?