

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

The modern Catholic and Anglican liturgies have a practice of “passing the peace.” It is like what we used to do in getting up and shaking hands with someone to greet them, except you say, “Peace be with you.” Then the other person responds in the same way. Annie Dillard, in her 1988 book *Teaching a Stone to Talk* recounts a fractious New York congregation who found the introduction of this liturgical practice so objectionable that they fired the priest and found one that was sympathetic to them!

We can all recount stories of church business meetings that have gone awry. Some of us have been deeply wounded by the politics of the church, and we are leery of too much involvement.

We need to be honest and say that people hurt people. I don’t know anyone who has been involved in church life that hasn’t been hurt at some point or another. The church is made up of people needing healing in Jesus Christ, and the reality is that many well-intentioned people cause great damage.

So if you were to split a church, how would you do it? James shows us how the early church was struggling in their early days. Facing a loss of cultural influence and power, how would they respond? These aren’t theoretical questions. We saw the damage that was done to churches during Covid when faced with governmental restrictions. Internal conflict was rife among churches. So I want to ask how you could split a church?

Fight for what you want

James now identifies two sources for how churches split. The first is that you fight for what you want. This early church, far from being the ideal, struggled with how to manage their loss of cultural influence. They were catering to the rich (2:1-7) while neglecting the poor (1:27). They had people who wanted leadership because they believed they had the right direction for the church (3:1), and as a result they fell into bitter envy and selfish ambition (3:14, 16). Their tongues got out of control and they began to speak ill of others (3:9-10). Some had been activists before, and some scholars suggest that it may have been possible that these former activists took things into their own hands, trying to solve problems with violence.

The problem, James says, is that there is a war going on. But the first war that is going on is internally – “your passions are at war within you?”

We need to understand that when James is speaking about passions and desires, they aren’t necessarily evil passions. The enemy of the best is often the good. And here is how it plays out in most situations. Someone has a good intention. They believe that their path forward is the best. When their idea isn’t initially accepted, they begin to work to create a base of support. They’ll talk about their concerns in their life group. They will raise prayer requests about something that is problematic. They will say that there are “people” who are concerned. Once

there is enough concern, they begin to act. Well intentioned, they can quote bible verses that support their cause.

Yet the root of the problem lies within us. And so when we don't get what we want, James says that we begin to view each other as the enemy, and then we use the earthly, unspiritual, and demonic ways to make things right. So passionate about what is right, we do the wrong things to solve the problems. And in James's day, it seems that the conflict had gotten so heated that those with zealot backgrounds may have let their emotions get the better of them and they actually killed someone.

So how do we recognize that our desires are a problem? One indicator, James says, is prayerlessness: "You do not have because you do not ask." If we think that change can come about but we do not take it to God, if we are talking about things to other people to "get a broad spectrum of advice" but we are not submitting our concerns to God, we will cause division and over time become false about the truth (3:14, 16). We might not be explicit about our motives for change. Or we will want to use power in a way that we aren't supposed to.

But we might be spiritual and be praying about our concerns and problems, yet the result doesn't come the way that we want. "You ask and you do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (v. 3). Even good things asked for the wrong reasons can be denied! We think we are protecting the church, but maybe our right motive does not align with the values of Scripture.

So do you want to split a church? Fail to realize that even our good desires are waging war in us. Don't pray. And if you pray and don't get what you want, act. Go talk to other people and tell them your concerns. Build a group of supporters. And I guarantee you will find all kinds of disorder and dissension will follow.

Live like the broader culture

James says that this kind of living is adultery: "You adulterous people! Don't you know that friendship with the world is enmity with God. Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." What does James mean? Living as a friend of the world means to live in a way that adopts the world's values and patterns in terms of how to make things right, and this is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic (Jas. 3:15). This echoes James's appeal in 1:27 to be unstained by the world.

The world is the system of thinking of this present age. It is not something physical, but it is a mindset. It has elements of the truth but is fundamentally opposed to the way of God. Instead of submitting to God's ways and God's design, verses are taken out of context to suit our agenda. We start with our concerns, not God's. We are burdened with something we want, even something good, and we turn it into something that we are passionate about. We use our words like the world does. We talk about things. We grumble and complain. We murmur. We don't work for a solution with those who have authority and responsibility, but we take things

into our own hands. We see something concerning and we talk about how things are going in the wrong direction, when all the while we aren't basing our concerns out of Scripture but out of how we think things should be done because another church did it this way or we saw other Christians be effective.

This is the way of the broader culture operates. You build coalitions. You work to get support. You raise concerns and build coalitions. You grumble and complain. You express how your desires and needs aren't being met. And what happens over time? You can say how good you're doing spiritually but then your relationships are a mess. Because our desires are off, James says that this is spiritual adultery. In the OT, spiritual adultery was seen when people worshipped idols. But here, James says it is when we adopt the methods and strategies of this world.

But how does God respond to all of this? "Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, 'He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us'?" What passage of Scripture is James referring to? If you look, you won't find a verse from the OT. So what is James doing?

On its most basic level, I think James is referring to the theme of how God is a jealous God. We see this in passages like Exodus 34:14 or Zechariah 8:2. And while this is an extremely hard verse to translate, the question is whether the spirit refers to ours or the Holy Spirit. I do think that in its context, it is best to understand that God's Spirit who dwells in us is jealous for our hearts.

You see, God doesn't want us to be worldly and divisive. He works by his Spirit because he is jealous for his glory and our good. He wants us to be humble people who receive grace (which we will return to next week) so that we would not have fights and quarrels among us. God sent his one and only Son to die to redeem a people for himself because he is jealous for his glory and our good. Which means that we ought to humble ourselves and find grace.

So we know how to split a church – it isn't that hard. But what should we do when we find ourselves troubled over something that is going on in the life of the church and we feel that there are needs not being addressed?

First, pray. James calls us to pray in v. 2. Submitting ourselves to God, humbling ourselves to God, means that before we open our mouths with a concern to others, we have brought it to God. And when we pray, if we don't see the answer that we want, we continue to pray. We pray earnestly.

Second, when we feel strongly about something, we should talk to another mature Christian for guidance. Instead of talking to many people, we should seek the wisdom of someone else who knows the Bible, who loves God, and who is committed to the church. But we shouldn't raise our concern to rally support, but to have them pray with us and see if our motives and desires might be off.

Third, we should talk to those who have the authority and responsibility to act in the life of the church. If that is a ministry leader, an elder, or a pastor, we should do that as soon as possible. And then when we have brought our concerns, we should pray for those who have the authority and responsibility to act. This is the wisdom that is from above – peaceable, pure, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits.

Jesus died for this church. He loves this church more than we do. His passion and desire is for us and for our good. So we ought to submit to him. When we humble ourselves and submit to God's way, we don't cause controversy, but we build up the church, we show that we aren't raising problems but aiming for solutions. We are showing that we do not operate according to the way of this world, but the way of heaven. We are aiming for peace, open to reason, full of mercy, good fruits, gentle, and sincere, we are humbling ourselves to receive grace.

You see, Christ died for his church to make us a people who love deeply from the heart. And so as we come to Christ, we find that he will take our desires and shape them and reorder them for his honour and glory.