

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for August 23: Who is your best friend?

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Walt Kelly created the comic strip Pogo which debuted in 1948. The setting was the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia. Engaging in social satire, using bumbling funny swamp animals, Kelly would reflect upon human nature. Pogo, the possum, was the straight man in the comic. In one episode, Kelley had Pogo say, "We have found the enemy, and it is us." There is no question in my mind that the church is its own worst enemy.

Chapter 3 ends with a discussion of the contrast of two kinds of wisdom. Wisdom that comes from heaven is "pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." Carnal wisdom is "earthly, unspiritual, of the devil" (vv. 15-17). Since wisdom from heaven brings peace to the fellowship of brethren, from whence does strife and conflict come?

James clearly cites self-gratifying desire as the culprit and cause of disruptions to peace and peacefulness, creating discord and conflict in abundance. James continues to develop his thoughts about the double-minded person in the church who is a Christian but who caters to his own selfishness.

Pleasure and selfishness enters the church through the minds and hearts of friends, associates, church leaders and everyone else. In the treatment of church conflict, be reminded that, most often, the tongue is the battle weapon of choice and can screech to a fevered pitch.

Source of conflict (James 4:1-6)

James addresses a familiar and caustic problem within the church family by asking the rhetorical question: "Who causes fights and quarrels among you?" He then answers his own question with, "Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?"

Then, with the mental tools of a diagnostician, James identified the problem quickly: Sin originates in desire. James 1:14 states clearly that one is tempted, not by God, but by one's "evil desire." Identifying the source is necessary to solve the root problem of conflict.

"Desire," ("you want something," v. 2), is neutral, a characteristic of human nature that may be good or evil. Pleasure can come from virtue (Galatians 5:22-23), and pleasure can come from vice. However, these "desires that battle within" are the sources and the seeds for "fights and quarrels among you." The KJV translated "desires" as "lusts," using the more sinister concept.

The Greek word for "desire" (v. 1) is where we get the word "hedonism," meaning the "desire for pleasure" and "sensual pleasure" (v. 3). The "desire" James refers to may be ruled by ungodly forces and is opposed to the good guidance of the Holy Spirit. These believers were passionate about an appetite of selfish desires. James condemns both the evil desire and the evil act. James is sensitive to the culture of the Greek and Roman hedonistic philosophy but convinced and certain that the Christian can and must control his selfish appetite by the added inspiration and strength of the Spirit of God.

The passion was strong enough that either mentally, physically (possible, but not likely), or both, killings and covetousness occur out of the quarreling and fighting (v. 2). These selfish desires are for one's self interest, focused toward such things as self-esteem, position, recognition, money, control, leadership, revenge, ineptness, laziness and sometimes

cloaked within a desire for God's work.

People generally feel they are right and, in an environment of democratic governance, have little reticence to hold back their tongue and body language, in public settings. The rhetoric behind the scenes can be even more caustic. Personal self interest is often the source of the destruction of a church or its witness, often hidden behind a public motive of doing God's will. Some people have personality flaws that parade around with a short fuse waiting to be lighted.

Uncontrolled desires lead to disastrous consequences that hurt others, break relationships and hurt the heart of God. Prayer equates to the desires of one's heart, therefore, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (v. 3). How many praying saints have failed because they prayed selfishly? The focus of the prayers may have been justified but the motives of the prayer were devilishly selfish and unanswerable.

With strong confrontation and rebuke, James emotionally exhorts, "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?" (v. 4). One could surmise the problem of selfish quarreling in the church had reached a volcanic level and needed direct forceful confrontation to be resolved. James, from his Old Testament heritage, equates this quarreling with unfaithful spiritual adultery. "To be a friend of the world" is to adapt a secular and worldly lifestyle, create discord and conflict in the church family, and speak with an uncontrolled tongue, among other things. That person is not just a stubborn, disobedient Christian but an "enemy of God" (v. 4).

Verses 4 and 5, taken together, reflect on the natural inclination of man's makeup toward the self-corruption of envy, covetousness, pleasure and the like, and God's unwillingness to share, with this unfriendly crowd, a common space in the heart of man. God has an extreme jealousy over the

spirit which he has placed within man. Failure can be overcome by God's abundant (more) grace in conjunction with a person's humility. His grace is greater in strength than the tempting desires of the flesh.

Turn to God (James 4:7-10)

Six clear actions for a remedy are affirmed in correcting behavior and restoring the sinner who has acted with such selfish, reckless abandon. The desires of the flesh in self-gratification must be addressed. Now we know the source of the problem and the way it is viewed by God, let us heed James' instructions.

Submit to God. "Submit" is an imperative, commanded as obligatory. Every Christian must recognize the battle of desires going on inside himself and bring self-gratification under control by submission to God and resisting the devil (v. 7). "Submission" means "to stand under" and is to humble one's self before God in subjection ("God opposes the proud," v. 6) even as Christ did by his death on the cross. Those who are humble place themselves under the rule of God and obey him, enriching their lives with blessings.

Resist the devil. Submitting humbly before God correlates, like balancing scales, to the resistance to Satan (the slanderer). "Resistance" means "to stand against" (Ephesians 6:13; 1 Peter 5:7) this roaring lion, this deceiver, this slanderer. The evil of the tongue and the words of quarreling members are the results of following the one who slanders.

When the believer submits to God, the devil will flee. Satan only can do what the individual allows. Resistance stops Satan in his tracks. Satan only can do what is permitted. Resistance to Satan and his tempting power is exemplified by Christ as he began his ministry (Satan left him alone, Luke 4:1-13). Place the devil with pride, and then Christ with humility. Satan can control the individual through a person's pride and defer the purpose of

God.

Come near. The word picture is that of a priest approaching God in worship. Each believer, being his own priest, strengthens his resistance by coming near. The more intimate the nearness the stronger the resistance. Submission and resistance merge in nearness and intimacy.

Wash and purify. As we come near to a holy and pure God, we see how ugly our sin is and how much God loves us. Selfishness is a cesspool of muck, pollution, contamination, impurity, defilement, intrusion, filthiness, foulness and poison. Cleanse your outward parts and your inward parts symbolized by “hands” and “heart.” Purify your spiritual life and moral life. “Sinners” are self-gratifying souls who live for themselves rather than for God and others, and who dote in pride while creating strife.

“Double-minded” are those who straddle the fence, one foot in the world and one foot in the kingdom of God, looking both ways, speaking out of both sides of the mouth, in church on Sunday and living a secular life during the week. This person, living in pretense, is a hypocrite. James preaches the double-minded become single-minded followers of Christ, giving all to God (Romans 12:1-2).

Grieve, mourn and wail. The state of mind for the sinner and double-minded should be that of repentance, a somber soul seeking forgiveness, prostrate before a gracious God. James understood the experience of acknowledging sin and seeking forgiveness. Contrast this state of mind with the selfish sinner who is proud and arrogant, the pleasure seeker who is in loud revelry, and the repentant person subdued and penitent, coming in godly sorrow into the presence of holiness. Awareness of sin brings sadness to life, turning “laughter to mourning” and “joy to gloom.” Keep in mind that repentance of sin, accepting the forgiveness of God, restores joy to mind, soul and spirit.

Humble yourself. Humility is for the rich person who “takes pride in his low position” and the “brother in humble circumstances” who “takes pride in his high position” (James 1:9-10). Those who are humble in repentance will be exalted or “lifted up” (v. 10).

Let the judge be the judge (James 4:11-12)

James returns, perhaps a postscript, to the tongue problem, specifically that of slander, a vice of the reprobate mind. Slander, at worse a kind of self-gratification, is malicious and vicious speech expressing hostility against a brother, the results of the desires that war within. James highlights this sin as an illustration of prideful defiance and a lack of humility. Perhaps rampant in the churches to which he writes, slander deprecates others with criticism growing out of pride. Slander is typically shared in small groups by someone with either an inferiority complex or a superiority complex who execute others with their tongue and arrogant spirit. By tearing down others, the person builds himself up.

Slander, a vice, is against the law. Though not specified, this writer will assume the “law” referred to is the Royal Law (James 2:8) or the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40) to love God and love one’s neighbor. The person who judges another person with slander judges the law which prohibits such insidious behavior as being unloving. The sin of slander does not just dishonor the one slandered, but the law of love, and the God who lovingly gave it.

Rather than judge your neighbor and the law of love, let God, the lawgiver, be the judge. God is the “only one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and destroy” (v. 12). There will be no such arrogant disrespect of God.

Acknowledge God’s sovereignty (James 4:13-17)

Pride, arrogance, self-gratification are carried forward into this paragraph to teach another spiritual truth. Assuming the same audiences, James directs his message to successful business men while keeping the core values the same. There are business men in these congregations who plan well in advance their business enterprise for making money (v. 13). He rebukes them for a fault that has to do with everything in their lives, including their business, addressing the uncertainty and the brevity of life, their attitude of boasting and self-centeredness, and the nature of their sin.

Planning for the material things is well and good but what about acknowledging the sovereignty and providence of God. Presumptuous about tomorrow, these people carried on business with only themselves in mind. Let us be reminded of story of the rich man who had great crops, built bigger barns to house his harvest and took no thought of others, death or eternity. God spoke, "You fool. This very night your life will be demanded from you" (Luke 12:13-21; Matthew 16:26).

James asked them, "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then banishes" (v. 14). Rather than an arrogant attitude boasting and bragging about a future of health, wealth and good times, there should be a humble acknowledgement of God's divine sovereign will. Boasting in self-gratification is evil (v. 16).

Applying the final verse of this section directly to this paragraph is appropriate though it is general in nature and may have broader ramification. Taking the message as it stands, it is a sin to omit doing the good one ought to do. No doubt, the sin of omission and neglect is one of the most sordid sins of the church. This exhortation is part of the moral responsibility of every Christian and one's conscious duty toward others. Considering good deeds as inconsequential and left undone is an act of uncaring disobedience and rebellion.