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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“FIGHTS AND QUARRELS”

James 4:1-10

☑ Election Day is November 6th, a week from this Tuesday. I encourage every citizen who is 18 years or older: exercise your right and fulfill your responsibility to our republic by casting your vote.

I am counting the days. Not that I am eager to support either major presidential contender; but I am eager for this election cycle to end!

Our system is, arguably, the best in the world. Yet it seems to bring out the worst in many Americans.

Surely most politicians initially seek office with noble intentions: to serve the entire public, to enact worthwhile legislation, to make a constructive difference. But aren't most corrupted by the power, the money, the celebrity, and the insidious culture of sleaze?

Surely many candidates prefer to run positive campaigns, focusing on policy and discussing substantive issues. But don't most sling mud, exploit their opponent's errors, and engage in character assassination (or allow others to do so on their behalf)?

Surely most citizens aspire to elect virtuous leaders who will courageously uphold our ideals of liberty and justice for all. But surely many vote for the politician who best taps into their fear, anger, and greed, the one who promises to protect *their* liberty, *their* wallet, and *their* safety – even if that involves curtailing the freedom, prosperity, and safety of others.

Sometimes it gets a little better. Sometimes it gets a lot worse. We should not be surprised.

What really distresses me is the degree to which professing Christians conform to the world in this. Some in the Church speak and act:

- as though they have a deeper bond with nonchristians who share their political convictions than with Christians who do not;
- as though it is more important to convert others to their politics than to win them over to Jesus;
- as though our future depends more on a particular candidate, or the political process itself, than on God's mercy and goodness;
- as though it is necessary, perhaps even virtuous, to slander, malign, and dehumanize those on the “other side”;
- as though a worthy political end justifies unworthy means (fear-mongering, hate speech, fraud, and the like).

☑ Sometimes, church life is disturbingly similar. Congregations are wracked by bitter battles over worship style, ministry techniques, and the finer points of doctrine. Too many believers adopt a “no holds barred” approach in disputes with a brother or sister. Some of the dirtiest fighting anywhere happens in churches.

☑ The same is true at home. Conflict is a fact of life; yet we too often behave as though “winning” the argument is our highest goal. Some churchgoers even use manipulation, verbal abuse, neglect, and physical brutality to control their families. Domestic violence is

as prevalent in some churches as it is out in the secular world.

■ Please turn with me to James 4:1 through the middle of verse 2: **“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?”** (Some desires are inherently good; but James uses the term ‘*ἡδονή*’ from which we get our word *hedonism*, and it is entirely negative.) He continues: **“You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight.”**

James has nailed it, hasn’t he?! The more things change, the more they stay the same: church Member “A” wants something, but does not get it; “A” blames Member “B”; ugly words are exchanged; rumors fly; bystanders take sides. What was an opportunity to exercise mercy and forbearance escalates into a “take no prisoners” war.

Physical injury and death are rare in modern church squabbles, though not unheard of. But remember what Christ Jesus said about this: {Mt 5:21-22}

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother [or sister] will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother [or sister], ‘Raca,’ [a term of contempt] is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

Precisely what Jesus means by **“angry”** in this passage is open for debate, but the basic truth is not: some anger is equivalent to murder; some angry words will expose us to God’s judgment.

Of course it is good to celebrate the things that bring joy to God, to grieve the things that grieve God, and to get angry at the things that anger God. Still, we must be slow to assume that our anger is righteous.

👉 First, our knowledge is finite and our perception is narrow. We are seldom in possession of all the relevant facts, and our ability to interpret them is limited by our experience and biases.

So when you feel the bile rising up in your throat step back, quiet yourself, and ask the *Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How* about it. Try on the other person’s shoes and see things from their vantage point.

👉 Second, right knowledge does not guarantee right motives. All human anger (including anger for the right reasons) is easily contaminated by pride, ambition, greed, and a lust for power. When these things creep in we are no longer righteous, and we risk of becoming as bad as the thing we hate.

So when you feel yourself beginning to boil inside, quiet yourself and ask *Why?* If you detect in your anger wounded pride, thwarted ambition, hindered greed, or a frustrated desire for power, back off.

■ Verses 2b-3: **“You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask you do not receive,**

because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

James observes that we **“do not have, because [we] do not ask God.”** He is still speaking about anger and conflict.

☑ Think back to your last quarrel. Were you aware of God’s presence? Did you feel his eyes on you? Did you sense him listening? He was there in the room with you.

As the argument unfolded did you take control of your tongue? Were you wise in your listening, in what you said, and in what you left unsaid? Did you pray (either silently or out loud) for guidance, for self-control, for God’s will to be done?

If we trust less in ourselves and rely on God to give (or not) as he sees fit, we will be less susceptible to sinful desire. If we cling to that trust even in our anger, we will be more aware of God’s presence, more inclined to seek his help, and less likely to sin. Our anger will be more constructive.

James also observes that when we *do* ask, we **“do not receive, because [we] ask with wrong motives.”**

When we make a petition to God and our motives are impure, he will not say “Yes”.

When God withholds from us what we want, desire rages within us.

When God gives someone else what we requested, we covet it. Or he does not give it to them, but for some reason we blame them for our lack.

Hence, we quarrel and fight, and the downward spiral continues.

The only way to interrupt the cycle is to examine ourselves, repent of our sinful motives, pray {Mt 6:10} **“your will be done on earth,”** in my life, in this relationship, in this situation **“as it is in heaven”** – and then choose to be content with the Lord’s answer.

I don’t know about you, but in my experience sin that is spawned by wrong or frustrated desires is among the hardest to overcome. It also catches the eye of skeptics who are quick to point to anger, covetousness, and discord in the Church as apparent evidence of our individual hypocrisy and the futility of the Gospel. That’s the bad news, and it is bad, indeed.

The great good news is that {1 Co 10:13} **“God is faithful; he will not let [us] be tempted beyond what [we] can bear,”** beyond what we can resist. And **“when [we] are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that [we] can stand up under it.”** I can attest that this is true.

■ Part of the **“way out”** is outlined in verses 6-10: **“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”** To the proud, everything that follows is impossible nonsense. To the humble it is heavenly wisdom and, by the grace of God, it is doable.

“Submit yourselves, then, to God,” surrender your entire being and all you have to his lordship. **“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God”** in prayer, in worship, in acts of holiness and practical faith, **“and he will come near to you,”** and whatever else we tell ourselves, isn’t that our deepest longing?

“Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” Stop hedging your bets and devote yourself entirely to Jesus.

“Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom,” lament injustice, immorality, and idolatry; lament the desires that battle within you, your false motives, your fights and quarrels. Remember, {Mt 5:4} **“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted”!**

“Humble yourselves before the Lord”: cast yourself on his mercy in the knowledge of his greatness and your smallness, his holiness and your sin, his abundance and your need, **“and he will exalt you.”** We covet and fight and quarrel often because we want to exalt ourselves, but it does not work. Yet when we humble ourselves before God, he lifts us up.

If we do this we will not be perfect, but we will no longer be controlled by our battling desires.

If we do this covetousness will abate and contentment will grow.

If we do this quarrels and fighting will diminish, in our homes, in our church, maybe even in the world (insofar as we are involved).

If we do this, our faith will be more real, more alive, and more powerful to save than ever before.