

21. The Sin of Hedonism

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. 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 4:1-3)

Strong Language?

We come now to James 4, a chapter whose general theme is that maturity of faith cannot be reached when there is friendship with the world. Remember that James is writing about very practical, down-to-earth matters in the lives of the church members. For James, as it should be for us all, faith is not only a matter of saying we belong to the Lord Jesus, but also showing it. Faith in Christ is a powerful, renewing, and activating force.

Sadly, in this respect, there is much evidence of sin in the churches. In chapter 3, James rather forcefully dealt with the sin of the tongue, how with the same mouth we praise God and curse men. The chapter ended, however, on a very positive note about the wisdom that comes from heaven which is pure and peace-loving. We are given the picture of a congregation that is considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere, the kind of congregation of which everyone would like to be a member.

As happens more often in James' letter, the next chapter begins with another reality check. It is a very sobering, even startling, chapter that deals with fighting and quarreling in the churches. James even writes about killing in 4:2. Some explainers suggest that the word "kill" is only a manner of speaking, an exaggeration of the truth to make a point, for who in the church of Christ would ever kill his neighbor? They believe that James is

using strong language for emphasis alone, since such killing never really happens.

Why, then, does James use the word “kill” in the present tense, as something that has happened and continues to happen? Are the saints capable of killing? Think of David who had Uriah murdered in order to cover up his coveting of Bathsheba. Whatever the case may be, these words are very alarming. And the root of it all is *covetousness*, forbidden in the tenth commandment of God’s holy law. In 4:1, James uses the word “desires”. This comes from a Greek word that has found its way into English as “hedonism”. Hedonism is the teaching that pleasure is the chief good in life. Life is like a lemon to be squeezed dry to the last drop. In the Roman empire, hedonism was a very popular philosophy of life, taught and practiced by many leaders and scholars.

James does not mean here that pleasure and enjoyment of earthly things are wrong in themselves. It is wrong, however, when this becomes the *only* purpose and striving in life, when we want what all others have, and even more. Hedonism always directs itself to earthly possessions and pleasures, and therefore is expressive of friendship with the world and hatred against God.

Is this language too strong? No, for these are not my words, but God’s Word. Let us consider how James exposes the sin of hedonism, or covetousness, in the church of Christ. We will see how the sad situation is sketched, how the single source of this sin is stated, and how the sure solution to it is sabotaged.

Fights and Quarrels

Let us first note that James does not ask whether there are fights and quarrels among the Christians of his day. What he does ask is this: “What causes fights and quarrels among you?” The reality is that they exist, and the implication is that they are commonplace. Envy and selfish ambition are mentioned more often in this letter, and James appears to be addressing a major problem of how hedonistic views and tendencies had corrupted the churches. Thrill-seeking adventurers and pleasure-seeking consumers were being found in growing numbers among God’s people. The philosophy of the day had its followers also in the church of the Lord.

The way this is presented shows us something even deeper. The fights and quarrels about which he writes are not directed against outsiders, who perhaps are seeking to disadvantage church members. James writes that these things are occurring among the brothers. It is one thing to seek preservation of one’s

position in the general society, but it is quite another to attack one another and climb over one another in the church.

In every household, there are sometimes disagreements. Those that James describes, however, are apparently not minor skirmishes. He uses two words: “fights and quarrels”. The first word (from which we also know a derivative in English as “polemics”) means an all-out war, using the most powerful weapons with the intent of destroying the opponent. It is an intense, personal fight to the finish. The second word, “quarrels”, is not less intense, but the means of battle is words. A quarrel is also a fight, but it is about differences in opinion, strife that can become very heated, very divisive, and even personally directed.

The Sad Situation

The situation can range from minor conflicts, perhaps quarrels, to complete battles, all-consuming wars of words that lead to certain deeds. In such an atmosphere, the tension can run so high that people literally attack one another. There are examples in our own recent church history of brothers and sisters accosting one another on the parking lot, of taking runs at one another with vehicles, and of having others removed from the church building. I am not focusing on any given church or situation, but these things have happened.

In 4:2, James writes, “You quarrel and fight.” We sense here that the fighting is ongoing and relentless. There is simply no end to the aggravation and accusations that fly back and forth, and new items are constantly added to an ever-growing list of grievances. I have seen files with hundreds of pages of every sort of insinuation and prejudice presented to major assemblies. Sometimes, it is almost impossible to go through such reports and ascertain where and why the problem actually started.

James sketches a very sad picture. Church members go from quarrels to battles, from lesser skirmishes to greater confrontations, until the fight becomes personal and vindictive. How easily it happens! And the result is that the church is not recognizable anymore as a communion of saints where the love of God, the peace of Christ, and the blessing of the Holy Spirit are evident.

The entire church is not always involved. There can be battles between individuals, families, or smaller groups within the church. No matter who is involved, however, battles leave people bitter and hurt. There is no worse pride than wounded pride. We must carefully consider how the situation is among

our local congregations. Are we all at peace with one another? Is each and every battle a just one, engaged for the right reasons and using the right means? Or are we judgmental and insensitive? Think about it: is there anyone in our congregation with whom we will sit at the Lord's Supper but to whom we would not give the time of day otherwise? Are there members of the church for whom we simply have no use, because of this or that, past or present?

The Single Source

We may not dismiss this text and think that it does not apply to us, that such things do not happen among us. Notice how James focuses next on what I have called the single source: "[our] desires." What causes fights and quarrels? They flow forth out of our desires.

I have already said that the root word is "hedonism", the lust for earthly pleasure. The battle that rages without, in the congregations, comes from a battle that first of all rages within us, writes James. Inside of us there is a need for more and better. "I want this, and I want that, and I want it now. I deserve it just as much as others do. Why should I have less than my neighbor?" Hedonism is a shameless celebration of selfishness. Why care about others? We should always have fun, and let others share in that only if we profit from it.

Hedonism does not ask whether the Lord approves of a certain desire, need, or activity. It does not start with God's Word, but with perceived personal needs and desires. It starts with us, what we want or think we deserve. We convince ourselves that we need something, and we go out and get it, no matter what the cost and pain is to others. That is typical hedonism.

In the recent past, there has been quite a controversy about legalizing same-sex marriages. This is not first of all a social issue, in terms of what society can bear. Rather, it is a personal, moral issue: what do we want, or think we want? Do our needs supercede God's Word? Or does God's Word always stand first, even when it goes against the grain of our sinful needs and desires? This is to be applied in every area of life, not just in sexual matters or marital problems.

An Internal Struggle

Notice that James writes about "desires that battle within [us]." There is an internal struggle that we must all face, the struggle against sinful desires. Sin does not come in from the outside, but it lives within us, constantly seeking to

break out. Society does not make sinners, but sinners ruin society. Sin is not the result of an interplay of external factors, but the powerful effect of an internal nature that is corrupt of itself.

Do we really see how serious the battle is, in which we can easily lose ground? Paul describes it in Romans 7:22-23. He writes about a war going on inside him: “For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind.” There is no way that we can stand in this battle in our own strength.

James also describes how our evil desires grow. He writes, “[We] want something but don’t get it.” Not getting what we desire only gives us the (wrong) incentive to try even harder. We go to extreme measures, “[we] kill and covet,” but we cannot have what we want. The way of sin is insatiable. Desire is never satisfied and, more and more, we become slaves of our own desire. Meanwhile, we cannot find satisfaction. Hedonism typically results in constant pursuit of more and better ways to enhance pleasure, but also in the inability to find the ultimate bliss, the everlasting high.

Is it not remarkable? We will never find what we are looking for if we seek happiness in drugs, sexuality, riches, fame, or power. The search for such things is merely a quest for false happiness that is doomed from the start. Happiness can be found only when we have peace with God, and when all our pursuits are in accordance with his precepts.

The Sure Solution

Up to this point, James has been describing a quest for satisfaction and happiness in which God is not sought. He writes in 4:2, “You do not have, because you do not ask God.” When we are on a solely personal quest, God does not “function”, to use a modern word. In such a case, God is not asked because we know quite well that what we want is wrong, harmful, or unnecessary. People do not normally ask God for something if they know he forbids it. They simply drift away from the Lord into the slavery of their desires.

But what if we do ask God? In 4:3, James mentions those who ask. Prayer is the sure solution to the sin of hedonism, is it not? We pray to the Lord, asking him to keep us humble and unselfish, and to give us what we need. We ask him to keep us from falling under the power of evil desire. Indeed, it is by prayer that we may resist the devil (see also James 4:7). The Canons of

Dort encourage us to always remain watchful and to pray that we do not fall into temptation.

The question is: are we praying with the right motive? Prayer is the only solution, but we can sabotage it when we do not pray with the right motive. Sinful lifestyle and evil lust are often covered up by pious words. Sometimes, people are deeply and genuinely mistaken. They have convinced themselves that giving in to certain desires is acceptable. They may even be misled into thinking that the Lord will accept what they are doing. They are prepared to face whatever risk this involves, and they also say that they pray. They truly believe that their striving is above-board and proper, and they may even think their battle is a holy one.

Often in the conflicts that take place in the church or in our personal lives, the name of the Lord is easily claimed. “God is on my side!” “No, God is on *my* side!” How can we know if God is truly on someone’s side? We can know by opening the Scriptures, studying the matters, and analyzing *how* he fights the battle. Is it a fighting of the good fight? We will know the tree by its fruit.

Our Motives

There are some people living in sin who try to cover it with pious words. They may say, “The Lord understands me, that is, he accepts me as I am. I pray to the Lord always. I ask him to bless my striving, for it is good.” They dare to say this even when the Lord has clearly said that what they are doing is not good, but evil. “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,” says the Lord. The tree is known by its fruit, in these situations also.

James writes, “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.” What wrong motives could there be? Let us look at the end of 4:3: “that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.” Even prayer can be totally self-directed and self-serving. What a horrible thought! We need to examine ourselves deeply, indeed, examine our prayers regarding our most secret motives. Why do we ask what we ask? Why do we want what we want? Is it to serve God? Is it to edify our neighbor? Or it is to serve ourselves, to spend what is given by grace for an effort of sin? We need to ask ourselves these questions.

There is a solution. Let us not sabotage it. We do not have to go under in the battle against our desires. We need not get involved in all kinds of quarrels and fights. We may pray that the Lord will sustain us in the spiritual warfare, and that he will give us proper motives, holy hands, and pure desires. And he *will* give us these, for our Lord Jesus sees our struggles and battles. He knows

why we fight when we do. He knows what we truly desire. We must be open to him, to his Spirit, and to his Word. We must say honestly, “Search me, O God, and know my heart...and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23, 24). He will do this, for he is a faithful high priest who takes our misery to heart. Let us then, in Christ, always pray with boldness and seek God’s face, there to find mercy, help, and grace (Hymn 33:5, 6).