

James - What's Wrong with a Good Church Fight?

Sign Title: What's Wrong with a Good Church Fight?

August 21, 2011

Good morning Faith Church! If you are one of our summer visitors, glad to have you. We are studying the book of James, and this morning we continue working our way through the book.

Last week we were in James 3:13-16. It answered the question, how do we know who are the true spiritual leaders? In other words, who are the people who really understand what it means to walk with Christ? James tells us we can answer that question by looking at *the way people think*. Those who have experienced saving faith should be thinking about life with godly wisdom. Last week, we learned two characteristics of godly wisdom were humility and meekness. Others in the church think about life with earthly wisdom. They are known for jealousy and self promotion. They think about life from an earthly perspective, never considering the time they will stand in front of Christ. They promote disorder. Their thinking patterns are inspired by demons.

This morning, James continues to pound home the difference between godly wisdom and earthly wisdom by expanding upon the way godly wisdom changes our thinking.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. James 3:17 (ESV)

How does godly wisdom change our thinking?

Pure

The first thing we notice about a person dominated by godly wisdom is their desire for moral purity. It is the dominant quality of their life. They see their

sin. They weep over it. They repent of it. They are not perfect people, but they want to be pure so they live life quick to repent of sin.

Why is there a desire to be pure? The Bible describes God as *holy, holy holy*. That is a way of triple underlining the word *holy*. It means God is all about purity. When godly wisdom dominates our thoughts, we think more and more like God. We desire to be pure and free from sin, just like God is.

Peaceable

Peacemaking is the next quality in a life dominated by God's wisdom. Earthly wisdom, which is really demonic wisdom, thrives on conflicts and division. When God's wisdom controls a life, it brings healing and a desire for reconciliation. It seeks relational wholeness, not fighting, blackballing, name calling and conflict.

As I was writing this, it reminded me of the comments section of some of the blogs I read. If you read blogs, you know some people love to use the comments section to verbally assassinate others. They love to create fights. That is not godly wisdom in action. Godly wisdom leads to peace.

Gentle

This means dealing gently with people. Gentleness is part of what it means to be meek. We learned about meekness last week. The Holy Spirit leads us to deal gently with people. That doesn't mean a man dominated by godly wisdom is not strong. It doesn't mean this kind of man does not provide decisive leadership. The Holy Spirit develops godly wisdom, which is firm but gentle with people, not harsh but loving.

Open to Reason

Some of you may have a translation that uses the term *submissive*. I like our ESV, because it better captures the Greek. The Greek says that godly wisdom makes us approachable. We are willing to listen to others' opinions. We may not agree with them, but godly wisdom leads us to seriously consider them. We know we may not be right. We don't dig our heels in and cover our ears when someone else gives his or her side of the story. We honestly listen. That is godly wisdom in action.

Full of Mercy

Thank goodness God is full of mercy. I need His mercy every day, just like you. The more godly wisdom dominates our thinking, the more merciful we become toward others.

Good Fruits

This is a catch-all term. There is good stuff coming out of our life. I like to think of this in terms of reputation. People say your name around town and they think of good things. Earthly wisdom produces bad fruit. When people hear your name around town they look away and cringe.

Impartial

This is the only place in the New Testament this word is used so it is a little harder to translate. It means *fair-mindedness*; not making judgments based on prejudice. Rather than saying things like, "What good can come out of Nazareth?" Godly wisdom leads us to not prejudge people because of their race, the town they come from, the school they attend and the family they grew up in.

Sincere

This means not being a hypocrite. It is being a genuine, up-front kind of man or woman. What you see is what you get. No hidden agendas. No scheming or conniving. Just an honest-to-goodness straight-up kind of person.

I don't know about you, but when I look at these character qualities, they are quite appealing. Those are the qualities I want in my friends. Those are the qualities I want to describe me. How do we become more like this? How do we get more godly wisdom into our lives?

The first thing to understand is that none of us can become this way on our own. We must have a relationship with God through faith in Christ. It is when we trust in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins that the Holy Spirit comes into our life and we begin to desire God's will. The Holy Spirit cultivates a change in our thinking. As we seek God's will, through His word, godly thinking patterns are downloaded into our life. God downloads a whole new operating system into us. I like the way Cornelius VanTil said it, "We begin to think God's thoughts after Him." We think about things the way God thinks. We value the things God values.

In theory, wherever Christians gather, these eight qualities will be on constant display. Churches should be a taste of life in the heavenly Jerusalem, because relationships should be characterized by peace, gentleness and harmony.

Guess what... that's theory, not reality. Unfortunately, churches are a place where people fight. That is not just true of churches today. It was true in

the ancient church. For example, in Philippians 4:2, Paul pleads with two ladies in the church of Phillipi named Euodia and Syntche to just get along and stop fighting. In 3 John 9, the apostle John writes about a guy named Diotrephes who thought he was a big shot and always put himself first. He refused to recognize any of the spiritual authorities over him. The ancient church was not always a place of peace and joy. There was conflict, just like there is in churches today.

When godly wisdom dominates the church, the church is a pretty good place to be. When earthly wisdom dominates the church, it is a place of conflict and pain. Demons are behind earthly wisdom, and they love to destroy.

Unfortunately, the first century churches James wrote to had a good number of people not practicing godly wisdom. As soon as we get to chapter 4, this is what we find James talking about.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. James 4:1–3 (ESV)

Where do most fights come from?

James asks, what is causing all this fighting in your church? If wisdom from above produces peace, why are you guys fighting so much?

First, we have to understand what James is *not* talking about. He is not talking about people who are wandering into heresy and there is a fight to protect the gospel. These are not gospel issue quarrels.

They are fighting over their *passions*. The word in the Greek is *hedone*, which is where we get the word hedonism. Hedonism says the most important

thing in life is for me to be happy. It is living to make sure my pleasure and preferences are satisfied. In other words, whatever makes me happy is what I should do. You feel sexual feelings towards someone you are not married to, and it would make you happy to have sex with them so you do it. You begin thinking of ways to seduce. You see the new clothing online, and you are sure you would look so chic in that dress. Out comes the credit card. Never mind you were saving for college and you wanted to give that money to orphans in India. Hedonism says the number one thing is what makes me happy. James tells us this is the source of many conflicts in the church. Some people want pews, others want chairs, so they fight. One group wants an organ, another group wants electric guitars, so they quarrel. I like the way Pascal describes the power of our passions.

All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves. (Blaise Pascal)

The driving passion to have church be the way that is comfortable to us is a very potent emotion.

Examples removed from public distribution to protect privacy.

Folks, conflict in the church is not God's desire. Again and again the Bible tells us this.

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. 1 Corinthians 1:10 (ESV)

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in

one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,
Philippians 1:27 (ESV)

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? 1 Corinthians 3:1–3 (ESV)

Paul says he cannot address the Corinthians as spiritual but worldly, because they are still thinking about life with the mindset of their flesh. They are battling over preferences. They are thinking with earthly wisdom. What are we to be known for?

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:34–35 (ESV)

Loving one another, the unity of the church, is far more important when we stand in front of Jesus than getting the color of carpet you wanted in the new building.

What should I do when church isn't my way?

...You do not have, because you do not ask. James 4:2 (ESV)

When church isn't the way we want, our job is not to lead a rebellion. It is not to be divisive. It is to pray. It is to talk to God about it, not everyone else about it. When we pray, one of two things will happen --- either God will change the situation or God will change us.

Some of you are saying, “Pray! That won't change anything!” I don't know where you come from but in this church we believe prayer does change things. God is alive, and he will respond.

...The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. James 5:16 (ESV)

I take away from this that if we are righteous, our prayers have great power. Second, James tells us that our prayers are often answered gradually. Sometimes it takes months or years for God to finish answering our prayers. That is the way God does things.

Over the years I have talked to far too many people who told me, they didn't want to be so divisive in their church but felt they had to be. They were leaders and believed God was calling them to lead an opposition group. James says, "Church didn't go your way? Galvanize a prayer meeting where you ask God to purify your motives and for the hand of God to intervene rather than your own."

Why will God not answer my prayers for change?

You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. James 4:3 (ESV)

One of the reasons God may not answer our prayers for change is because we are just demanding our preferences. Maybe God is making church uncomfortable for us to change us! We don't grow spiritually without pressure.

Conclusion

As I close, I would like to give you an example of how to disagree with godly wisdom in the church. It comes from one of the most famous and public theological feuds in church history. It was between two of the greatest Christian leaders ever: George Whitefield and John Wesley. To give you an idea of their stature, it was said George Whitefield was more recognizable in America than the

President of the United States. They went to college together and knew each other for a long time. They came into disagreement on the issue of election and predestination. Whitefield was for it. Wesley wasn't. Their disagreement was very public and was often in the media. Despite their passionate disagreement, godly wisdom dominated their thinking.

One day, reporters asked George Whitefield if he thought he would see John Wesley in heaven. Whitefield said, "No, I do not think so." Reporters scribbled down notes saying *Whitefield doesn't think Wesley is a true Christian*. Then Whitefield continued, "My dear brother Wesley will be so much closer to the throne of God that from where I will be, I will not be able to see him." That is godly wisdom in action.

When George Whitefield was about to die, he asked John Wesley to preach at his funeral. The funeral was an incredible example of men who passionately disagreed over issues; but they put them aside when it came to the greater unity of Jesus.

Whitefield once wrote on how he hoped to use the dispute with Wesley to reach others for Christ.

I hope as I make advances in the spiritual life, I shall show my zeal more and more tempered with true Christian knowledge and prudence... I desire not only to do things for God, but to do them in the best manner... While others are disputing, let us be growing. This will be the best way to convince those, who you find will not be convinced any other way. I lose nothing by being quiet and leaving all to Him.¹

Let me read the underlined sentence again. This will be the best way to convince those, who you find will not be convinced any other way.

¹ Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, Vol. 2, pg. 75.



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