

Fighting And Not Asking

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[0 : 00] Stephen Langton was Archbishop of Canterbury between 1207 and 1228. A controversial figure in his day, Langton is famous for inventing something which most of us use every single day.

During his tenure as Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton divided the Bible into chapters. The book of James has five chapters because Langton, as he read the text, saw five significant subdivisions and made them chapter 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

In the original Greek manuscripts, there were no chapter numbers and really not very much to indicate significant subdivisions in the text at all. So it was Stephen Langton in early 13th century Kent who invented, for fair or for foul, the chapter divisions we have in our English Bibles today. But for all his academic brilliance, Langton was not inspired of God and so time and time again he got his chapter divisions wrong. Rarely is this more true than in the transition between James chapter 3 and James chapter 4.

One might suppose there is a significant change in subject between James 3.18 and James 4.1, that James has finished talking about wisdom from above and now he's going to change tack and talk about something altogether different.

[1 : 36] But the reality is that this chapter division is a 13th century imposition and that in James chapter 4 verses 1 through 3, James is still talking about wisdom from above and wisdom from below.

In other words, how Christ-shaped wisdom leads to peace, whereas earthly, unspiritual and demonic wisdom leads to fights and to quarrels.

Unfortunately, for many Christians, their experience of church tends far more toward the latter than the former. I've never been a member of a church, but there's been quarrelling and fighting at some stage or another.

And for James, that's a sign that something is seriously wrong. Something we can't perhaps see directly, only in its effects. Well, this evening, in defiance of Archbishop Langton, I want us to engage with James 4 verses 1 through 3 at two levels.

First, the presence of war.

[3 : 32] The presence of war. The presence of war. Well, as I said earlier, for many Christians, their experience of church tends more toward war than peace.

One of our wise elders has said to me on more than one occasion that he's lost more sleep over tensions in the church than over any other area in his personal or professional life.

Hurts between Christians fester and grow. Disagreements widen with each side of the argument using scripture as a weapon.

If you think Glasgow City Free Church is any different from any other fellowship of God's people, then you're in for a rude awakening because we too have our share of fights and quarrels from time to time.

Every family does. It's just that in the church, it's just that in the church, it tends to hurt more and leave us with more significant scarring. It is a well-acknowledged fact that there is a missing generation in the Free Church of Scotland.

[4 : 39] It corresponds to those in their mid-50s to late 60s. Why is that? Well, when you consider the recent history of the Free Church, it's not too difficult to find where the missing generation have all gone.

These people were growing into adulthood and developing into leaders during the dark days of the 1990s, when the church was at war with itself. When ministers were publicly accusing one another of immorality and ungodliness in heated general assemblies, and the self-righteous were using the truths of scripture as weapons to divide rather than as medicines to unite.

And those who were young adults at the time, developing into leadership, became disillusioned by the poor example being set them by their leaders.

They found the church a place of hostility rather than a hospital for the hurting. They became disillusioned. And no, most of them didn't leave the Free Church.

The truth is they left the faith altogether. I know of what I speak from personal experience of being friendly with many who were in that position. And there are still small sections of the Free Church for whom the split of 2,000 still rankles.

[6 : 05] No wonder these sections of the Free Church are experiencing not just no growth in their membership, but experiencing a steep decline. For many of us, James 4, 1 and 2 paints an uncanny picture of what we experienced in the church during those days.

And when I said earlier that it's unfortunate, I was misspeaking myself. Unfortunate it is not. Sinful it was. Sinful it was. Pure and simple sin.

I don't want to spend too long on these verses because the deeper you look down into the darkness, I think it was Friedrich Nietzsche that said this, the deeper you look down into the darkness, the darker you yourself become.

But let me, through three phrases James uses, open up the darkness of war in the church. First, fights and quarrels.

Second, soldiers at war. And last, desiring and killing. First, fights and quarrels. Fights and quarrels.

[7 : 13] James' discussion of the darkness of disunity and disagreement begins and ends with fights and quarrels. He writes, verses 1 and 2, What causes fights and quarrels among you?

Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire, so you don't have, so you murder, you covet, you cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.

Isn't it interesting that in 2 Timothy 2.24, in his description of the Lord's faithful servant, the aged apostle Paul says of him, The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome.

Unfortunately, too many servants of God are too quarrelsome. They're always looking for a fight. They are, to use a great American Standard Version phrase, they're pugnacious.

They have to win every argument in which they engage. One of the Greek words James uses in verse 1 is, is that from which we get our rather outdated English word, polemicist.

[8 : 27] Someone who is always arguing about something or another. I've got a minister colleague that's rather like that. He is always quarreling with someone.

He's always engaging in polemics. He must win every argument in which he engages. And what he doesn't realise is that although he might win the argument, he's lost the person.

It's entirely possible for someone to always be right, but to always be wrong. To be a divisive influence because he must always be seen to demolish his arguments, to demolish his enemy's arguments.

Like as not, there are many things it's right to disagree over, but most often, not the things we think. Remember, all the way through this book, James is disagreeing forcibly with the false teachers who are infecting the church with their poisonous doctrine.

But what he's telling us is that there's a Christian way to disagree and there's just plain fighting and quarrelling. Disagreements aren't always unhealthy.

[9 : 41] What is unhealthy is the pugnacious, quarrelsome, and confrontational ways with which we try to resolve them. Such pugnacity, quarrelling, and fighting is what turned off the free church's missing generation.

It wasn't the disagreement. There's a confrontation and the tension as battle lines were drawn by the opposing parties and the truths of scripture were being used as weapons of war rather than as instruments of health.

How careful we must be that we disagree well with one another because there's a world of war for us. If we don't. Fights and quarrels.

Second phrase. Soldiers at war. Soldiers at war. Having asked why there are fights and quarrels among them, James now suggests to his readers that they come from their passions which are at war within you.

James uses the word literally translated as soldiers. To describe how our carnal passions are at war. Our passions.

[11 : 01] Literally our hedonism. Our pleasures. Our soldiers at war within us. It's really such an evocative image, is it not? James and his listeners were very familiar with the Roman legions and

their fighting tactics.

The terrifying brutality and violence of battle. The screams and the anguish and the blood. And he says to us, you have these legionaries within you.

They're warring. That's why there's fighting. And that's why there's quarrels in your fellowship. It's our passions which are the springs of our division.

The selfish ambition. The jealousy of which James spoke a few verses earlier in chapter 3. The within you reference in verse 1 may be in the first instance speaking of the individual Christian at war within himself.

So his own heart is not at peace. It is riven by bitter envy. It's riven by selfish ambition. And his confrontational attitude to others is the way he's taking out that inner conflict on them.

[12:18] This person is an unhappy and an angry person and he's taking that unhappiness and that anger out on others. He is at war in himself and he wants to extend that war outside.

But it may also be the within you be speaking of a fellowship of Christians at war with themselves. Not only do they disagree about something but their disagreement is descending down into bare-knuckle fighting and quarrelling.

One group want to be on top and because they're not they are bitterly envious of the other group and they go to war against them. But make no mistake the matter upon which they have disagreed is lost in the violence of their disagreement.

They've stopped talking with and to each other and are now talking at and about each other.

Hostilities commence because our passions run hot.

We're spoiling for a fight. That's earthly, unspiritual, demonic wisdom for you. It leads to disorder to every vile practice in the church.

[13:39] When someone is bitterly critical of me I tend to listen very carefully not just to what they are saying because what they say might have a grain of truth but to what I can't hear but I really know they are saying which is basically I'm hurt and I'm going to take my heart out on you.

Thinking this way makes it easier to love them to forgive them to pray for them. And then thirdly we have soldiers at war we have fights and quarrels we also have desiring and killing the third phrase dark phrase you desire you do not have and so you murder.

The pathology of the destruction of a church fellowship is right here in these words the desires of its members the passions which are at war within them.

If you conducted an autopsy of that congregation the result would come back death by suicide caused by uncontrolled desires.

The desires for power for status for control for things to be done my way. It can be as simple really you know as a game of football among small children the ball belongs to one of them and when things aren't going his way he takes the ball and he goes home so that no one can play and he says it's my ball I can do what I want with it and I'm not playing anymore.

[15:31] It's the politics of the nursery translated into the dynamics of the church when a leader says things aren't going my way and therefore I'm going to do what I need to do to get what I want.

I don't really care who gets hurt in the process just as long as I and the way I think comes out on top.

And make no mistake though the police may not need to send in CID to investigate the conflict has murdered the faith of many of the weaker members of the fellowship. The reason why the missing generation left the church during the 1990s was that they were old enough to know what was going on and see the hypocrisy of senior leaders but not mature enough to take it to the Lord and leave it with him.

Murdered them and all because one group was at war with another and didn't really care about the spiritual fallout on the weaker members. You know there are many parts of scripture with which if I'm being honest I can't really relate but James 4, 1 through 3 isn't one of them.

I've equally been the victim of fights and quarrels and the perpetrator of fights and quarrels. I've been the murdered and I've been the murderer.

[16:59] Surely we've all got to know at least this. When this kind of war is going on between Christians it's a sign that there's something really wrong with us.

That our wisdom is not from above but earthly and spiritual and demonic. And in this kind of conflict there are no winners at all.

There are only losers in need of repentance and restoration. presence of war. But then secondly this evening the presence sorry the absence of wisdom the presence of war the absence of wisdom the absence of wisdom.

You know for for most years I had never heard of Stephen Langton. I really didn't know that the chapter numbers in the text were not original so whenever I read James 4, 1 through 3 I was always confused about what it is that we are not asking for the lack of which causes fights and quarrels or what it is which we ask for on the basis of wrong motives.

I thought that perhaps it referred to how one Christian may ask God for something and when he receives it another Christian becomes jealous of what God has given him and that's where the conflict comes from.

[18 : 26] So for example it could be something as simple as this. One Christian has a happy marriage another Christian does not have a happy marriage and the Christian who doesn't have a happy marriage takes his frustration out on the Christian who does.

The question of the haves and the have-nots. But when you realise that this chapter division is artificial and therefore that James 4, 1 through 3 are a continuation from James' discussion of wisdom from above and from below you conclude that what we're not asking for the lack of which causes fights and quarrels or that which we're asking for on the basis of wrong motives is nothing less than God's divine wisdom.

In James 1 verse 5 he writes if anyone lacks wisdom let him ask God what is it that causes fights and quarrels among God's people which unleashes the soldiers at war among them that which that which leads to desire and murder it is a fundamental lack of God's wisdom that wisdom spoken of in James 3.17 as being pure peaceable gentle open to reason full of mercy and good fruits impartial and sincere so what believers who are fighting and quarreling with each other need most is God's wisdom the Christ-like purity and sincerity of the cross-shaped life but they don't have it why is that? because first they're not asking for it and second they're wrong asking for it the first reason they don't have it is because they're not asking for it they're not asking for it James says to them you do not have because you do not ask you do not have because you do not ask one group in the church are justifying their positions using the truths of scripture one group insists that the other group is wrong and vice versa what's really going on James says is a power struggle a fight for control for rights and for status for it to be done God's way which in reality for either party means our way it may clothe itself in ecclesiastical language but this is what's going on at the most basic level one child is taking his football home because he's not getting what he wants in some ways when when the situation gets to the fighting and quarreling stage it's already too late for there to be a reconciliation before tribalism sets in the whole fellowship are to ask for ask God for wisdom earnestly praying that whatever the disagreement might be between them

God would make us people of purity peaceability gentleness reason mercy goodness and sincerity rather than the church becoming a parliament with opposing benches each seeking power by whatever means it becomes what God designed it to be a hospital for the hurting and a boat from which to fish for the souls of the lost the wisdom of Christ is absent and the earthly and spiritual and demonic wisdom is most definitely present now don't misunderstand James here he's not saying even for one moment that the reason that one group in the church didn't get their way is because they didn't ask God for it because they didn't pray for it what he's saying is that they should have been praying they should not have been praying rather they should not have been praying to get their way in the first place or to get what they wanted rather they should have been praying for God's wisdom to prevail both in the individual and among the collective what they wanted or didn't want was largely irrelevant what God wanted was that they as individuals and as a church were pure peaceable gentle open to reason full of mercy and good fruit impartial and sincere as long as there were those things then whatever they disagreed about wouldn't have led to fights and quarrels wars and murders in other words and this is very challenging for us they should not have been praying that

[23 : 35] God would change the minds of other Christians minds to make them more like them but that God would change their own minds to make them more like Jesus they should never have been praying that God would change the minds of other Christians to make them think like they do they should have been praying that God would change their hearts to make them think to make them as individuals think like Jesus remember this is the James who is strongly disagreeing with the false teachers in the church to whom he is writing but the wisdom from above of which he

speaks begins in one's gospel transformed Christ shaped heart listen carefully a sign that you are most definitely wrong when you are disagreeing with other believers is that rather than praying for God to change your heart you are praying for God to change theirs if you are doing that you are in the wrong we are not asking for what we should the Christ like gospel driven transformation of our own hearts

James is so called wisdom from above in all the churches to which I belonged where there has been tension of one kind or another I have never yet heard any of the warring parties especially the 1990s pray these words Lord change me make me pure peaceable gentle open to reason full of mercy and good fruits impartial and sincere I know that when I have been in conflict with other Christians even when they've been in the wrong to my considerable shame I haven't prayed this way or prayed for God to make me pure and peaceable and gentle so on it's an absence of wisdom not asking for it not asking wrong asking wrong asking to go back to a previous point to labor it because that's what James does so many

Christians pray for wisdom after the fact we have made up our minds about the correct course of action and if anyone should get in the way of our plans well they're just destined to be cannon fodder we're going to win the argument at any cost even if that cost should be the person that we disagree with don't we realize that if we've lost the person we've lost the most important thing by contrast if we are praying for God to change our hearts before we ever pray for God to change their hearts we're in course to keep the most important of things the family of Christ intact there are some people who are used to winning arguments I'm not I always seem to lose arguments but there are some people who are used to winning arguments I go back to that ministerial friend of mine he's so pugnacious to my knowledge he has never lost an argument and when I hear him speaking I'm tempted to think to myself I wish he would lose just this once all this verbal violence is just doing him no good it is making him prouder to the point that he thinks that he is the repository of all wisdom and he is invincible in other words even when he's right he is wrong because he's lost the person he's arguing with the sad thing being that I think he's got to the point where he doesn't really care the wisdom we are praying for listen carefully to me when I say this the wisdom we are praying for is not the wisdom to win it is not the wisdom to win if we should pray for that kind of wisdom then we'll be asking wrongly to spend it on your own passions those passions being bitter envy and selfish ambition feed a bitterly envious and selfishly ambitious person with success and you're on your way to making a sociopathic monster who is out of control in the church rather the wisdom we are praying to God for is to be pure peaceable gentle open to reason merciful full of good fruits impartial and sincere it is not to win an argument against another person it's to win the battle against ongoing sin within oneself that battle which if we cease to fight results in fighting and quarreling so what wisdom are you praying for if you're praying for any at all why are you praying for it pray for the wisdom of Jesus that wisdom which is his portrait and his exact likeness that wisdom which if God should be so gracious to give it to us will make us more humble not more proud and more selfless not more selfish this is the wisdom of

Jesus and the wisdom of the gospel I don't know whether Stephen Langton had it I wonder whether in the 1990s the free church had much of it either but this I do know God has it for us today in the gospel let's pray let's pursue Christ's wisdom peaceability gentleness openness to reason mercy full of good fruits impartiality sincerity and sincerity let's pursue it in the gospel it's by faith we believe in Christ and by grace we live for him and we live like him let's pray our loving heavenly father we confess our individual and collective lack of wisdom we've often prayed for the wisdom to win we've often prayed for

[30 : 31] God for you to change the hearts of others those we disagree with very very rarely have we prayed for you to change our hearts that the wisdom that you would give us will be the wisdom of peaceability and gentleness forgive us for being pugnacious oh Lord for always looking for a fight rather help us to unite on the basic truths of the gospel love your people from the heart fervently Lord we pray for churches today this evening which we know are riven by disagreement by fighting and quarreling we ask that you would change the hearts of all those involved as you would change our hearts the sides may not be taken the church would become less of a parliament with opposing benches shouting at each other more of a hospital for the hurting and a boat for which to fish for the souls of men we ask these things in Jesus name

Amen mean H you