OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Why Are You Fighting?

David Anguish

Olive Freeman relates that when it came time to serve the cake at a kids' birthday party, "a little boy named Brian blurted out, 'I want the biggest piece!' His mother quickly scolded him. 'Brian, it's not polite to ask for the biggest piece.' The little guy looked at her in confusion and asked, 'Well then, how *do* you get it?'" (Rowell and Steffen 1996, 81).

Most of us have enough experience with children to know the likely outcome had Brian's mother not intervened. Because they begin life completely dependent on others for their needs, children must be focused on themselves. Self-centeredness—often one of their first words is "mine!"—is their default position. They must learn to wait their turn, share, and show empathy. But we expect them to learn those things as they grow. So, when adults exhibit the self-centeredness typical of infants and toddlers, we rightly criticize them for being "childish."

Unfortunately, childish behavior in grown-ups has more serious consequences. Hurtful self-serving decisions are made, relationships are ruptured, reputations and, at times, livelihoods and lives are destroyed. In worse cases, heinous crimes are committed, or horrible wars are begun.

In our better moments, we refrain from self-centeredness, but none of us is guaranteed immunity from it. We are all susceptible to periodic surrender to our self-focused desires and reverting to childish ways. In James 4.1–12, the author confronts such an occurrence, calling his readers to

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account for behaviors that resulted from their pursuit of earthly, unspiritual, and demonic wisdom instead of the wisdom from above (3.13–18).

An Exegetical Problem

Before we look at the teaching of verses 1–3, we should acknowledge the debate about the grammatical structure of the first part of verse 2, "the punctuation of [which] may be the most difficult exegetical problem" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 187). The UBS5 Greek text punctuates verse 2 as follows (my translation uses the vocabulary but not the punctuation or interpretation of the ESV):

> ἐπιθυμεῖτε καὶ οὐκ ἔχετε[a], φονεύετε[b] καὶ ζηλοῦτε καὶ οὐ δύνασθε ἐπιτυχεῖν, μάχεσθε καὶ πολεμεῖτε, οὐκ ἔχετε διὰ τὸ μὴ αἰτεῖσθαι ὑμᾶς,
>
> You desire and do not have[a], you murder[b] and covet and are not able to obtain, you fight and quarrel, you do not have because you do not ask,

The UBS editors' notes on *echete* and *phoneuete* call attention to different punctuation in the translations. Some place a period after each word, some use a semicolon, and some have a question mark. The differences represent two interpretations of the first part of the verse. The KJV, ASV, NKJV, NIV 1984, NET, and CSB have three sentences (or phrases). The ESV, RSV, NRSV, NASB, and NIV 2011 have two statements consisting of an action, cause, and consequence. We see the difference by comparing the two editions of the NIV:

> NIV 1984: "You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight."
>
> NIV 2011: "You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight."

Among other issues, the debate includes discussion of issues such as how the phrases are to be understood with the rest of verse 2 and first part of verse 3, whether James is using a chiastic structure, and whether a word must be added to make sense of a commentator's interpretation (see e.g., Davids 1982, 157–158; Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 187–188; McCartney 2009, 208). We will note only that, while the meaning is not significantly different either way, the translation represented by NIV 2011 better fits the flow of the passage.

Ugliness on Display

As we turn to the teaching of verses 1–3, we note first that few of us would willingly cast our lot with a community like the one depicted. There were "quarrels" (πόλεμος, *polemos*), a word used for military conflicts or a state of hostility and antagonism (Bauer 2000, 844). There were "fights" (μάχη, *machē*), a word used in Greek literature to refer to actual battles, but in early Christian literature only in the plural to refer to "battles fought without actual weapons *fighting, quarrels, strife, disputes*" (Bauer 2000, 622). The conflicts resulted from "passions" that were "at

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war within you." "Passions," or "pleasures" (NASB), translates ἡδονή (*hēdonē*), "an intense pleasure or enjoyment" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 187).

The passions were "waging war" (NASB; στρατεύω, *strateuō*) "in your members" (NASB 1995; "in your body parts," NASB 2020). The Greek phrase is ἐν τοῖς μέλεσιν ὑμῶν (*en tois melesin hymōn*). Both it and the previous "among you" (ἐν ὑμῖν, *en hymin*) in verse 2 include plural pronouns that can be understood to refer either to inner conflicts within individuals or interpersonal conflicts between community members. Since, in the context, James has been concerned with the problems of "bitter jealousy" and "selfish ambition" (3.14), the community conflicts option is the better one. But these conflicts did not arise from a vacuum. One person wanted one thing while another wanted its opposite; neither would yield to the other, so "words were exchanged." Thus, the point is the same whether James intended "within each of you" or "among you." Because people were acting from self-focused motives, the church was enduring severe tension.

It is of interest that James begins with the most serious outcome: "You desire and do not have, so you murder [φονεύω, *phoneuō*]." As previously noted (here, here), interpreters differ on the specific meaning of "murder," but, in view of Jesus's teaching (Matt 5.21–22), it is best to understand it as a metaphorical reference that effectively serves to impress on them the severity of their quarrels.

But, as serious as their quarrels were, we should not allow our attention to them to distract us from James's emphasis on their cause. The "murder" they were committing was evidence of frustrated "desire." This verb (ἐπιθυμέω, *epithymeō*) is not always used negatively in the NT (cf. Matt 13.17; Luke 16.21; 17.22; 1 Tim 3.1; 1 Pet 1.12), but James uses it that way here. Their "desire" for what they "do not have" (οὐκ ἔχετε, *ouk echete*) is the reason for their hatred and devaluing of others; they were violating the principle behind murder. Similarly, their fights and quarrels were caused by the fact that they were not able to obtain (οὐ δύνασθε ἐπιτυχεῖν, *ou dynasthe epitychein*) what they coveted (ζηλόω, *zēloō*) (for positive uses of this verb, cf. 1 Cor 12.1; 14.1, 39; 2 Cor 11.2).

But there was another reason for their strife: "You do not have, because you do not ask" (v. 2c). In what sounds like another echo of Jesus's teaching (Matt 7.7–8), James says they were not receiving because they were not presenting their desires to God who has promised to give wisdom to those who ask (Jas 1.5; cf. 3.17). Additionally, they were "ask[ing] wrongly to spend it on [their] passions [*hēdonē*]" (v. 3). In short, they were not giving God the priority of place he deserves. The first group did not take him into account; the second thought "the gift-giving God [could be] manipulated as a kind of vending machine precisely for the purpose of self-gratification (see 1:26, *apartōn kardian*)" (Johnson 1995, 278).

Conclusion

Kent Hughes tells of hearing about "a congregational business meeting that turned into a brawl which was finally stopped by the local police!" That's distressing, but what's sadder is his

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subsequent observation that such events happen frequently enough

> that the caricature of a feuding church is found everywhere, as a young father learned from his children. Hearing a commotion in his backyard, he looked outside and saw his daughter and several playmates in a heated quarrel. When he intervened, his daughter called back, "Dad, we're just playing church!" (Hughes 1991, 166; cited from Leslie B. Flynn, *Great Church Fights* [Victor Books, 1976], 7).

That children in their innocence can make a game of church quarrels and fights is further evidence of their seriousness. Children who see church fights as a game now will likely be more tolerant of the real thing when they are the ones setting the example. We find the solution in James's counsel in verses 4–12: self-examination, evaluation of our priority, and course correction as needed.

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Additional Thoughts on James

"Some people have a sort of religious dissipation in attending revival services and imagine that they have accomplished a great deal if they simply go. People easily acquire itching ears that love to be tickled with some sensation. The word takes no root in the hearts of such men. They run from church to church to get a new word, a sort of soda-water habit. They deceive themselves but nobody else. These spiritual 'gada-bouts' are shallow and skim the surface only. They make a sort of motion picture but accomplish nothing substantial in their own lives or in the work of the kingdom. They are guilty of a logical fallacy and are victims of their own delusions (cf. Col. 2:4). One has thus a case of autointoxication. He has inoculated himself with the virus of his own error."

~ A. T. Robertson. n.d. *Studies in the Epistle of James.* Rev. & ed. Heber F. Peacock. Broadman Press, .

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