

TANTRUMS IN THE CHURCH

JAMES 4 v 1-3

Where do all the fights and quarrels among you come from? They come from your desires for pleasure, which are constantly fighting within you. You want things, but you cannot have them, so you are ready to kill; you strongly desire things, but you cannot get them, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have what you want because you do not ask God for it. And when you ask, you do not receive it, because your motives are bad; you ask for things to use for your own pleasures.

Those of us who are parents will no doubt remember the times when our children blew tantrums. As a father I have my own memories of such experiences. Within our family when we get together we often recall these occasions and laugh about them, but at the time they were no laughing matter. People talk about the terrible twos, but most parents discover that it doesn't get much better as their children get older. Those of you who are grandparents may witness your grandchildren blowing tantrums. This is different because it isn't your problem to sort out. You leave your children to deal with it. Why do children blow tantrums? In the majority of cases, it is because they want to get their own way and can't get it. We have all witnessed the scene in the aisle of the shopping centre when a child blows a tantrum at the confectionary shelf. The child is demanding a packet of sweets, but the parent, usually the hapless mother, emphatically says; "No". The child howls and screams and lies prostrate on the floor. The steely looks of the unsympathetic shoppers passing by make the mother feel inadequate because she can't control her child. Tantrums are not easy to handle.

According to James in his letter, it's not only young children who blow tantrums. He says that Christians in church blow tantrums and he makes it very clear that they are very nasty ones. They can lead to all kinds of serious consequences; 4 v 1-3. Eugene Peterson paraphrases these verses in The Message in a graphic way; **"Where do you think all these appalling wars and quarrels come from? Do you think they just happen? Think again. They come about because you want your own way, and fight for it deep inside yourselves. You lust for what you don't have and are willing to kill to get it. You want what isn't yours and will risk violence to get your hands on it...You're spoiled children, each wanting your own way"**.

James uses a question to introduce his topic; v 1a. The Greek word; 'polemoi' is translated 'wars' and the Greek word 'machai' is translated 'fightings'. Both words were often used to describe physical conflicts between nations or individuals. Words like 'fight', 'war' and 'battle' are sometimes used in a metaphorical sense to describe verbal disputes. For example, 'the senators fought over the legislation that was passed in the House of Representatives'; 'The members of parliament relished a battle over reducing company tax'. It's quite normal these days for the members of parliament to fight among themselves over energy policy, climate change and the leadership of their party. It doesn't mean there

are fisticuffs in the party room, but it does mean there are factions within the caucus of the parliamentary party.

The Christians to whom James was writing were obviously engaged in verbal battles. They were fighting among themselves. It is deplorable that the Christian church is so often characterized by heated debates and bitter controversies. During my forty years of ministry, I have seen church life blighted by power struggles and major conflicts between strong personalities and groups of people. I have been part of a Presbytery (group of Presbyterian churches in a geographical area) that had to deal with conflict between individuals or groups of people. I have known of several situations where a dispute within a church was seized on by the press who gave the church bad publicity. The consequence of this was that the church's effectiveness in gospel work was blunted.

There are some battles in church life that are worth fighting for, but even then, they must be fought without sacrificing Christian principles and virtues. We are not told what the disputes that James refers to were about. It seems likely that they centred round relationships. James seems to be bothered more by the selfish spirit and bitterness of the quarrels than by the rights and wrongs of the various viewpoints.

James points his finger at the passions that were at war among the church members. The Greek word 'hedone' translated 'passions' means 'pleasure'. It often carries the negative connotations of sinful, self-indulgent pleasure. James uses a war analogy to describe the battles between desires that raged inside the members; v 1b & 2a. This is a challenge to us who are involved in church life. There is a strong-willed determination in us to have our own way. When we don't get it we blow a tantrum. We pray with wrong motives; v 2b & 3. W Barclay wrote; **"no one can ever pray aright until he removes self from the centre of his life and puts God there"**. Let's get rid of selfish desires so that there will never be any tantrums in our churches or Christian communities.