

Introduction

I'd like to introduce what I'm preaching about today by showing you three power point slides. They show that I'm preaching about people doing what? That's right – fighting like cats and dogs.

Fighting Like Cats and Dogs

We begin with James 4:1 and what James calls the **"quarrels and conflicts"** among the recipients of his letter. The Greek word translated **"quarrels"** means **"wars"** and the word translated **"conflicts"** means **"battles."** Paul addresses the same subject with equally vivid language in Galatians 5:15. He warns the recipients of his letter not to **"bite and devour"** each other. The Greek words translated **"bite"** and **"devour"** were used to describe animals fighting with each other.

Those words that James and Paul use are metaphorical. What they stand for is persons fighting with each other. We ourselves use similar metaphors. One author, for instance, calls personal fights **"little jihads."** **"Jihad"** is an Arabic word that Muslim extremists use to describe what they're doing. They're waging war. That metaphor parallels those of James. Or we've all heard it said or said it that persons are **"fighting like cats and dogs."** That simile parallels the metaphor of Paul, and is the most instructive of all. What James and Paul write about in our texts is people fighting like cats and dogs.

How People Fight

We all know what it means to fight. People attack or assault each other. They act to harm or prejudice each other in some way. They say or do things to make each other suffer spiritually, mentally, physically, mentally, emotionally, circumstantially, materially, and/or relationally.

I remember two neighbors in Barberton who had a series of conflicts with each other. Finally, one moved his big outdoor dog, who barked

incessantly, to the property line right under the other's bedroom window. She demanded that he move it because it was making her life unbearable. But he refused because that was what he intended it to do. So, she sued him and wanted to ask for punitive (punishing) damages in her complaint.

Those neighbors illustrate that fighting doesn't have to and usually doesn't involve physical assault. People attack each other in countless ways. They slander, gossip, tongue-lash, backbite, criticize, tattle tell, insult, steal, falsely accuse, vandalize, sue, disturb, withdraw, sabotage, give the silent treatment, and on and on it endlessly goes.

Why People Fight

That's what people do, and in 4:1, James explains why. He asks, **"What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?"** He then answers that it's the **"pleasures"** that **"wage war"** in people's **"members."** He identifies those pleasures in the words **"lust"** and **"envious"** in verse 2. Those words reveal the source of fighting. It's the inherent egocentrism (self-centeredness) of human beings.

I'd explain it this way. Because they're egocentric, people want three things more than any others: security (having their needs met), satisfaction (having their desires fulfilled), and status (being respected or praised). They pursue those things wholeheartedly and become angry or upset with anyone who gets in the way. Those who get in the way, of course, usually do so because they're pursuing their security, satisfaction, and status. There's a clash of conflicting desires, in other words, and it almost always ends in mutual attack, in fighting.

Some years ago, a neighbor of mine, who was on her church's board, told me how awful her pastor was. Oddly enough, I met him several months later at a funeral service we conducted together. Afterwards, he told me how awful his church's board was, actually naming her, not knowing she was my neighbor. She attacked him by gossiping about him. He attacked her in the same way. They had conflicting desires (different aims for the church) and were fighting about it.

Notice something about them. They were professing Christians, actively involved in their church just as the recipients of the letters of Paul and James were. In his book *The Body*, Chuck Colson wrote: "**Pick any community at random and odds are at least one local church is in the midst of a bloodletting.**" Even if it isn't a bona fide bloodletting, there are some Christians fighting about something in most churches today, just as my neighbor and her pastor were.

Fighting Consumes People

But whether it's in the church or out of it, notice the ultimate result of fighting in Galatians 5:15. The fighters are "**consumed.**" The Greek word translated that connoted the destruction of something by fire. An old Irish folktale tells about two Kilkenny cats that fought each other so furiously there was nothing left of them but their toenails and tails. That's the idea that the word "**consumed**" here conveys. Fighting is always destructive in other words and I mean that literally "**always.**" It does three things.

First, it disgusts God. He is holy, 100% morally pure, and thus always reacts adversely to sin. The Bible calls that adverse reaction of His "**disgust.**" To fight, as our texts make clear, is sin, which means the dominant reality of the universe is always disgusted with us when we do.

Second, fighting disintegrates personality. Our text in Galatians 5 immediately precedes Paul's discussion of what he calls "**the desire of the flesh**" and "**the fruit of the Spirit.**" We can infer, therefore, that fighting makes us more fleshly and less spiritual in the core of our being. That's profound. It means, for instance, that I will be a less "**kind**" person after fighting with someone than I was before. That in turn makes me more likely to fight again than I was before. Fighting with anyone for any reason is a dramatic spiritual setback.

And third, fighting destroys witness. In John 13:35, Jesus gives non-Christians the right to judge whether or not we're Christians by the love we have do don't have for others. Please grasp the ramification of

that. People have the God-given right to conclude that we're non-Christians when we fight with anyone for any reason.

Some years ago, the pastor of a Friends church and its elders fought over pacifism and patriotism. Their quarrel eventually became so heated that they took it to the church sign. The pastor put a pacifist slogan on the sign, which the elders replaced with a patriotic slogan, which the pastor replaced with a pacifist slogan, and on it went for months – until finally the pastor was forced to resign, with a great deal of anger and resentment I'd add. That pastor and those elders "**consumed**" each other just as the Kilkenny cats did. It all ended with their God disgusted, their personalities disintegrated, and their witness destroyed.

I'd sum it up this way. People fight because they think they'll be better off for it, but according to Paul, they're always worse off. Please grasp that. Fighting is always more detrimental than beneficial, always.

Don't Fight

So, don't fight. That's the call of our texts. Don't fight with anyone for any reason. God wants us to eliminate attack as a means of dealing with people, period. We firmly make the decision that we will never again assault a human being. We will never again act to harm or prejudice anyone, to make anyone suffer, in any way. We make that decision and then do whatever is necessary to carry it out. We try and train our best to carry it out.

I've discovered a scandalous thing over the years. Most Christians haven't made and aren't carrying out that decision. Or to say it another way, they don't intend not to fight. The problem is this. Attack is so much a part of human life, so common, that they think it's inevitable and normal. They've never considered that they could live without it and so don't even try. They attack others, as a result, with hardly a tinge of guilt in doing so.

But if we're Christians, we have the transcendent power and life of the Holy Spirit in us. We can live without fighting. So, we begin

by intending to do just that. We make and carry out the decision that we'll never again assault anyone for any reason.

Twenty years ago, my former brother-in-law called me on the phone about a sensitive family issue and I attacked him. I said things to him I shouldn't have said and with tones I shouldn't have used. When I hung up the phone, the Holy Spirit immediately convicted me and I felt damned for what I'd done. It was a life-changing experience for me. That night I made and am still carrying out the decision to eliminate attack as a way of dealing with anyone for any reason.

But while eliminating attack is necessary, it isn't enough. That's the negative side of the coin. But there's an equally necessary positive side of it as well. Paul reveals what that is in Galatians 5:13-14.

There was apparently a group in the immediate church to which he wrote that was libertine, as the later Gnostics were. They believed that God's grace gives us the liberty to live (sin) as we please. In this context, therefore, we can attack people and not worry about it.

But that isn't so, Paul contends in verses 13-14. Don't be fleshly and attack, he writes in verse 13, but love instead. We're fulfilling the whole law of God, according to verse 14, if we do.

So, let's love everyone. That exhortation has no meaning of course unless we define it. Dallas Willard does just that in his book *Renovation of the Heart*. Listen to his relationship altering words: **"But every contact with a human being should be one of goodwill and respect, with a *readiness* to acknowledge, make way for, or assist the other in suitable ways."** Notice the two elements of love here. The first is attitude. We have goodwill or respect for people. We're **"for"** them in other words. The second is action. We acknowledge, make way for, or assist people in suitable ways. We act to benefit or help them in whatever ways we can, big and small. We say and do things to add value to their persons and lives.

We do so even when they attack us. It takes two to tango and it takes two to fight. So, if we don't attack when they do, but love

instead, there is, by definition, no fight. Christians loving as they should eliminates fighting as a reality in their lives and the lives of others.

Ideally of course, God wants love to be mutual, but that won't happen pervasively in the world. People's natures don't allow it. But it can happen pervasively in the church. When Christians routinely engage Jesus and His kingdom at hand, the Holy Spirit transforms the core of their being and makes them Christlike. They're then capable of loving each other mutually and not fighting – and will if they intend it.

Conclusion

The result, when they do, is an earthly community of people that foreshadows the future heavenly community Isaiah 11:6-9 and 65:25 so beautifully describe. They picture the heavenly community in terms of natural enemies, wolves and lambs, lying down together in peace.

Those texts remind me of a story about a 4th century saint – Martin of Tours. A Dominican friar walked into a room by the monastery kitchen and was startled to see a dog and cat at Martin's feet, eating peacefully from the same bowl of soup. Just then, a small mouse stuck its head out of a hole in the wall. Martin, without hesitating, addressed it as if it were an old friend. **"Don't be afraid, little one. If you're hungry come and eat with the others."** The mouse hesitated, but then scampered to the bowl of soup. The friar was speechless as he watched the dog, cat, and mouse, natural enemies, eating peacefully together at Martin's feet.

That story envisions the unparalleled fellowship of the heavenly community in Isaiah. You and I who follow Jesus will one day be part of that. But until we are, God's wants us to replicate it, even if imperfectly, in our church. He wants us to make our church a harbinger of that community right now. So let's do just that. Let's not fight with each other like cats and dogs. Let's love each other habitually and pervasively instead.