

James, who was the brother of Jesus, wrote this letter to the Jewish followers of Jesus who were dispersed outside of Israel. It is his legacy; his wise interpretation of the teachings of Jesus, sprinkled here and there with insights that sound a lot like excerpts from the book of Proverbs. This particular segment of his letter focuses on the dangers of selfish ambition. He not only admonishes against this, but he offers some thoughts on *why* such desires develop in the human heart and mind.

It's clear from this passage that conflicts and disputes have developed among some of the followers of Jesus. And James insists that such behavior is a direct result of both a lack of godly wisdom, and a failure to seek the Wisdom of God with all one's soul and strength. So, how are we to understand and apply what James is trying to teach us?

Well, Jesus and the disciples in the Gospel reading, provide us a perfect example of what James is warning against. Here, the disciples, a group of friends or at least colleagues, fall into an unspiritual and evil folly. They argue over who among them is the greatest. I think it's fair to assume that their argument involves a grasping for power; a craving for significance. They also might be posturing for control of the movement that Jesus has

inspired, especially in light of his announcement that he will soon be killed.

Self ambition has clearly taken hold and is throwing them all into a downward spiral.

As we consider how these passages speak to us, the tendency is, of course, to immediately think of all the people we know who fit the description that James outlines and that the disciples live out. We might think of celebrities or politicians, neighbors and family members; friends and colleagues who like to make sure that people know how important they are, or who look out for their needs and wants first without considering others. It's so easy to point the finger at all those supposedly horrible people out there. Much harder to turn that same finger toward our own selves.

Now, maybe we don't all have the same narcissistic streak that the disciples demonstrate. But we all do have desires that sometimes negatively affect others. James calls those desires ***the cravings that are at war within us***. As teacher and author Jack Kornfield has said, "Grasping and wanting are two names for the most painful aspects of desire...There are beneficial desires such as the desire for the well being of

others, the desire for awakening, the creative desires that express the positive aspects of passion and beauty. [And] There are painful aspects of desire—the desires of addiction, greed, blind ambition, or unending inner hunger.” Hungers such as the need for significance, the need to be right, or the need to control one's environment.

William Blake once wrote that: “Those who enter the gates of heaven are not beings who have no passions or who have curbed their passions, but those who have cultivated an understanding of them.” James more or less says the same thing as Kornfield and Blake. Having the desire or the craving is not the problem. It's what kind of desires we have and how we manage them that is at issue. James is writing about this very normal internal process. His clear opinion is that our passions or cravings have an impact not only on our own health but on the delicate balance of family and community.

And, the cravings that he has observed in his readers have clearly not been in service to the well-being of self or others. They have not been beneficial desires. On the contrary, his readers want things in order to satiate their

own pleasures and to ease their own longings. They do not want things that create peace.

Let me give you an example of what it can look like to cultivate an understanding of one's passions or cravings. In his book Wise Heart, Kornfield tells the story of a student named Arthur who was obsessed with making a lot of money. Kornfield suggests to Arthur that he pay attention to how this desire shows up physically in his body. So, as Arthur starts paying attention, he notices that the desire comes with tension and trembling and a sense of fear and insecurity. The longer he stayed with those sensations, however, the more he began to understand how empty and needy he felt. Those feelings, in fact, helped him remember when his father had lost his job, and how though he was only ten years old, he had wanted to help his father get money and save the family.

Paying attention to the physical sensations and mental images and thoughts did not take away his bad feelings entirely, but it did help Arthur understand where they were coming from, and by having compassion for himself he saw that he could connect to life in a healthier way. He could feel the pull, the wanting, the craving, and understand that he had a choice

to follow it or not. He had a choice to be led by his fear and insecurity or led by compassion for himself and for those around him who were impacted by his behavior.

In Christian spiritual practice, this kind of intentional awareness comes from a place of deep and abiding trust that true peace and righteousness are sown by those who align their desires with the well-being of others, rooted in humility and God's holy wisdom.

We don't simply wish it to be. We don't find just the right level of concentration to make it happen. We commit to making it so within our own being, and we join our intention with a power that is greater than our own; a presence that is both within us as creatures made in the image of the Divine and blessed by the Spirit, and around us in the world God created. When we submit ourselves to God, to use James' language, and draw closer to the source of all things, we can see our cravings more clearly and make mindful attempts to shift our way of being.

Let's try it out for a minute. If you're comfortable doing so, close your eyes, notice your breathing and let your shoulders drop away from your ears.

And then bring to mind a picture of the thing that you crave the most. Now maybe you'll think first of food. And if you do, consider why. And maybe you'll think about an experience, a person, a sensation or a memory. Whatever comes up, just notice how that image makes you feel.

And then ask yourself: Where do I feel it in my body? Is it a sharp or dull sensation? Breathe into the area you feel it in your body and allow it to expand. Don't fight it. Allow it to be there. And then ask yourself "is this a craving that benefits the well being of all, or if it is a craving that seeks to meet only my needs?"

And after you've sat with that question, then say a prayer like this one:

"I am open to the presence of God in this moment.

And I welcome the gift of God's gentle wisdom.

I yield to the movement of the Spirit in me, and through me,
and I ask that mercy and peace settle within me and around me
as I act to make peace a reality.

May compassion be my heart-song.

May we find our way to peace through our compassion for one another.

Amen.