

GNITN

#684

A Contentious Spirit

I'm Happy

You know, sometimes it's the little things that put a smile on my face. One of those things right now is when I go to get the mail now. For months I was inundated by political ads filling my mailbox. And then miraculously they all stopped coming to me. It was like a breath of fresh air. And at the same time I could look at my phone and not see texts bugging me to vote for this candidate or that one. Although my wife and I usually stream the television shows we watch, once and awhile we'd actually watch live shows and the political ads touting the accomplishments of one politician or demeaning the other one just ended as well. I'm sure I'm not alone in being thankful that I am free from the relentless, dare I say assault on my senses by the election season even if half of them I agreed with. I may not like the constant attempts to sway my opinions in the hopes of winning, but I certainly know that political campaigns consider them vital parts of their election strategies and I can appreciate their tenacity to get votes that way even if it filled my recycling bin precipitously.

Vying For My Attention

Which also brings me to the other ads that want me to buy this or buy that. Advertisers point to one single day out of all the year to get customers to spend their hard earned dollars on their products or services. And vendors even had to change their rules on those early morning sales pushes after people actually were killed when they were trampled over by crazed consumers. You know this as Black Friday, a term coined that way because so many companies and businesses went from being in the red, losing money to the black from sales on the day after Thanksgiving. Here is how an article from *history.com* explains it:

Sometime in the late 1980s, however, retailers found a way to reinvent Black Friday and turn it into something that reflected positively, rather than negatively, on them and their customers. The result was the "red to black" concept of the holiday mentioned earlier, and the notion that the day after Thanksgiving marked the occasion when America's stores finally turned a profit...the one-day sales bonanza has morphed into a four-day event, and spawned other "retail holidays" such as Small Business Saturday/Sunday and Cyber Monday. Stores started opening earlier and earlier on that Friday, and now the most dedicated shoppers can head out right after their Thanksgiving meal.

There is actually a [web site](#) that has a running count of injuries and deaths from what we know as Black Friday. Whether you like it or loathe it, the concept of Black Friday when businesses compete for our money is etched into our society.

Higher Stakes

But people who long to be rich soon begin to do all kinds of wrong things to get money, things that hurt them and make them evil-minded and finally send them to hell itself. 10 For the love of money is the first step toward all kinds of sin. Some people have even turned away from God

because of their love for it, and as a result have pierced themselves with many sorrows. (1 Tim 6:9-10. TLB)

When counseling young Timothy, the Apostle Paul gave him these famous words of advice. Paul no doubt knew what he was talking about because he was not a poor man before his conversion to Christianity as we read in an [article](#) about him:

Several hold that Paul was wealthy throughout his lifetime. For example, A. N. Wilson, the prolific biographer of such figures as Tolstoy, C. S. Lewis, Milton, and Jesus, sees Paul's trumpeted self-sufficiency and his successful trial at Jerusalem as proof that he was independently wealthy clear to the end of his life. For other scholars, including the well-known Martin Hengel and Joseph Fitzmyer, Paul's Roman citizenship and his educational background necessarily presuppose significant monetary resources of his family. Several other writers support the idea that Paul came from a family with wealth and high social standing, but they question his own status and means during the time of his apostolic ministry. F. J. Foakes-Jackson, for example, describes Paul's independent financial position as being attributable to the wealth of his family, who may well have held a good deal of social prestige and lived in "easy circumstances," but nevertheless he notes that Paul felt the pinch of poverty at times because of the sacrifices and inconveniences that clearly accompanied his ministry.

My point here is that Paul knew that if he or anyone in ministry got enamored with riches, they could be corrupted by it. He decided to live simply and mostly off the giving of others if only to avoid losing his higher calling of spreading the Gospel of Jesus to as many people as he could.

It Was A Fight

There is a word that comes up when talking about religion and that is the word "contention" and it is [defined](#) this way:

The act or an instance of striving in controversy or debate, conflict, a violent effort to obtain something, or to resist physical force, whether an assault or bodily opposition; physical contest; struggle; strife, strife in words or debate; wrangling; angry contest; quarrel; controversy; litigation, a violent effort or struggle to obtain, or to resist, something; contest; strife.

Contention is not always a bad thing, though as seen in this definition of the word:

Strife or endeavor to excel; competition; emulation.

In the early church we see both play out in the life of Paul as he strove to squash the followers of Jesus and was actually on his way to Damascus with permission to kill them when he had an encounter with Jesus Himself:

All this time Saul was breathing down the necks of the Master's disciples, out for the kill. He went to the Chief Priest and got arrest warrants to take to the meeting places in Damascus so that if he found anyone there belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem. 3-4 He set off. When he got to the outskirts of Damascus, he was suddenly dazed by a blinding flash of light. As he fell to the ground, he heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?" 5-6 He said, "Who are you, Master?" "I am Jesus, the One you're hunting down..." (Acts 9:1-6, MSG)

Paul's Resistance

In the King James Version verse 5 reads like this:

And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

As a young believer I read that verse and was confused. The only other version of the Bible I has was *The Living Bible* and that curious phrase wasn't in it. In fact, that wording isn't in any others even now and I'm not sure why because it encapsulates exactly what Paul was doing as we read in an [article](#) from [gotquestions.org](#):

"It is hard for you to kick against the pricks" was a Greek proverb, but it was also familiar to the Jews and anyone who made a living in agriculture. An ox goad was a stick with a pointed piece of iron on its tip used to prod the oxen when plowing. The farmer would prick the animal to steer it in the right direction. Sometimes the animal would rebel by kicking out at the prick, and this would result in the prick being driven even further into its flesh. In essence, the more an ox rebelled, the more it suffered. Thus, Jesus' words to Saul on the road to Damascus: "It is hard for you to kick against the pricks."

In essence the man named Saul was contending with Jesus when he was persecuting the saints and, in doing so it was driving his internal suffering to high levels. Jesus knew this and told him in a way that he would understand. I like how the same article goes on to put it in context: *Jesus took control of Paul and let him know his rebellion against God was a losing battle. Paul's actions were as senseless as an ox kicking "against the goads." Paul had passion and sincerity in his fight against Christianity, but he was not heading in the direction God wanted him to go. Jesus was going to goad ("direct" or "steer") Paul in the right direction.*

There's a sermon in there, but I'll move on.

Religious Contention

As we read in the book of *Acts* Paul went from working for the religious and political leaders of his day to contending against them. He was beaten and left for dead because of his evangelistic endeavors. He was thrown into prisons for it as well. The community he served tirelessly for then tirelessly turned against him. Along the way he did his best to contend for the faith he contended against. In another article from [gotquestions.org](#) we read this about such contention:

The epistle of Jude is written to Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem. In the opening passages, the author explains that he had initially intended to write a general letter of encouragement on the topic of "the salvation we share." Instead, Jude explains, "I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people" ([Jude 1:3](#)).

Like today, we are faced with people who are doing their best to rip apart our faith, but Jude tells us to fight back:

Jude is concerned because "the faith"—the Christian message of the gospel—is under attack from false teachers who are spreading dangerous [heresies](#). Jude urges his readers to contend for the faith against those who seek to undermine and erode it. The Greek word Jude chooses, translated "contend earnestly," usually describes an athlete striving with extreme intensity to win the victory in a physical competition. The Amplified Bible translates the command as "fight strenuously for [the defense of] the faith."

Jude tells his readers to take a competitive approach to the fight:

Jude wants all believers to contend earnestly for the faith. A true contender vigorously endeavors to win the competition, not holding anything back. In this case, the struggle is for “the faith,” which is the saving truth of Jesus Christ and His teachings ([2 Corinthians 11:3–4](#); [1 Thessalonians 2:13](#); [Hebrews 1:2](#)).

Unfortunately, this means not agreeing with family, co-workers, and friends which at times is not easy, but it is necessary.

Speaking The Truth In Love

The Apostle Paul had to contend for the faith a lot. He even had to argue with the early church (see [Acts 15](#)) over their treatment of Gentiles. But we see that he learned a helpful way of doing it and we see that in this verse:

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. (Eph 4:15, NIV)

He knew that all truth can be harsh, but all love can be ineffective even if it is well-meaning. Yes, I know that the balance of the two is hard to figure out since there are times where more truth is needed than love, but there are also times when a little truth goes farther if it is couched in a lot of love. Regardless of the situation, contending for the faith need not separate believers or cause hurt when witnessing to unbelievers, although it often does. It doesn't mean that we don't contend for our faith at all though. We just need Holy Spirit to guide us when we do. He knows the heart of people and can and will give us wisdom when we have moments when we can share the Good News to one person or many. Contention has led to some people being burned on the stake as happened to John Hus back in 1415 whose only crime was wanting to follow the Bible's teachings (see this [article](#)). Will we have to face that fate here in America? I certainly hope not, but it could happen in lesser forms and to be honest, it actually has. We live in a contentious day with new ways of “kicking against the pricks” as it were. Hopefully those who oppose Christianity will at the very least let things play out. But for those of us who are contending for the faith, let us now get tired of doing it:

And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. (Gal 6:9, NKJV)