

### **Driven to Win: James and John**

You can tell a lot a lot about a person by how they drive. Their basic personality is revealed by who they are behind the wheel, especially when someone cuts them off in traffic, nearly causing a wreck, getting you stuck at a red light, and in essence ruining your whole day.

Now a small percentage of you are the super sanguine types that sees the man wanting to cut you off and you cheerfully stop in the middle of the road, backing up everyone behind you to let him in. And then you go on your merry way.

More of you though, are probably more like me. The idiot cuts you off. You swerve to miss him, while slamming on your horn, but of course the horn is not enough. You have to yell at him, belittle his driving skills, and question his humanity. "You stupid idiot Where'd you learn how to drive? Did you get your license out of a Cracker Jack Box?"

Now, it's not like he can hear you. Do you think he will be overwhelmed with guilt and send you a check with a note of apology? Some do get more animated and verbose than this, but I won't get into that.

Some of you are more creative in showing your disapproval. After you swerve to miss him. you pull on into the next lane and position yourself so that you will come to the red light right next to him. There you engage in psychological punishment. You roll down your window and slowly turn and glare at the inconsiderate jerk. That's not enough, though, no siree. When the light turns green, you hit the gas, pull in front of him and slow way down. Or perhaps you will follow him about 1 inch off his bumper, even altering your planned route, just to intimidate him.

There are two guys. They never drove a car, but if they did. I know exactly what kind of drivers they would be. They would be like Dale Earnhardt behind the wheel. They would let nothing get in their way. They had somewhere they wanted to go, and they weren't going to let anyone else slow them down, and woe be to anyone who tried. I'm talking about two brothers, both apostles, named James and John.

James and John were driven, driven to succeed, driven to achieve, driven to the top. These guys were high achievers. They were highly motivated and didn't back down to obstacles. From a certain point of view, you can see why Jesus selected these two sons of Zebedee. He needed some hard charging, go-getters to help start the church.

James and John fit the bill. They were part of Jesus' inner circle, a select group of three disciples who were included in some of Jesus' most intimate moments. This group was Peter, and the two brothers James and John. They were present with Jesus at His transfiguration. There they saw their teacher in a divine, glorified state (Mt. 17:1-9). They were also present when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead (Mk. 5:35-43), Jesus also asked this group to pray for Him

before His arrest in the garden of Gethsemane. The apostle Paul called these three the pillars of the Church (Gal 2:9).

However, James and John weren't exactly the perfect pair. In their pursuit of achievement they were often selfish. They loved the spotlight. They were highly competitive, and could get quite angry when something got in their way.

In many ways, James and John are the perfect apostles to speak 21<sup>st</sup> Century America. They would fit right in with our culture. They could run the rat race. They could climb the corporate ladder. They could post angry tweets and irate memes with the best, I'm sure.

We live with a heavy pressure to perform. Our culture places high value on all the external trappings of achievement. Busyness has become a virtue. Just listen to the conversations in the break room or around the water cooler, as co-workers exchange notes on how early they had to get up and how late they went to bed. Driven people like James and John seem to thrive with all the pressure and competition, but they do it like wrecking balls, crushing others, neglecting their own inner lives, and forgetting some of the more subtle and important aspects of life. And eventually they can burn out. Ours is a stressed-out world

I found the following in Jeffery Pfeffer's book, *Dying for a Paycheck*:<sup>i</sup>

- Job stress is far and away the major source of stress for American adults and...it has escalated progressively over the past few decades.”
- 80 percent of workers...reported feeling stress on the job.
- One quarter of employees view their jobs as the major stressor in their lives and that problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than any other stressor, including financial or family problems.

But the greatest costs to our lives are spiritual. This isn't just a business or work problem. It is a family problem. It is a church problem, and it is a problem in your relationship with God.

How can a driven person develop a Christ-like character? I believe our basic personalities are a part who God created us to be. To an extent, it's hardwired into us. Now it gets shaped and directed by a lot of other influences along the way— family, education, early experiences.

But, this is key, your personality doesn't dictate your character. It should be the other way around. A few years ago, Gordon MacDonald wrote a wonderful book called, *Ordering Your Private World*, where he talks about some of the basic traits of the driven personality. We can readily see these in James and John.

## **1. Driven People Are Most Gratified by Accomplishment**

Achievement is what really floats their boat. The big contract. The promotion. Scoring the big job. They're always looking for another trophy in their case. If they can't find this achievement for themselves, they will seek it vicariously through their children.

## **2. Driven People Are Preoccupied With Symbols of Success**

Our culture says success drives this, wears that, eats here, buys this, has this hair style. This can be different things in different places. In a big city, it might be driving a Mercedes. Around here, it might be a jacked up, extended cap F250 4x4. If it's important to you to have a certain image, so that people think of you as successful or accomplished, you might be a driven personality.

## **3. Driven People Are Usually Caught in the Uncontrolled Pursuit of Expansion**

Their motto is more. Driven people have a hard time being content with where they are, and what they have. There's nothing wrong with dreams, desires, and goal, but when they become so consuming that you can't enjoy or appreciate what you have, then that uncontrolled pursuit has become an idol.

All of these can be seen in James and John. This is especially apparent in a certain request they had of Jesus in Mark 10:35-40:

*Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "We want you to do for us whatever we ask. "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, 40 but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.*

## **4. Driven People Tend to Be Highly Competitive**

Driven people are highly competitive. They view life as a competition. Everything is about winning or losing. Did they score a better deal on their new shoes than their best friend? Did they get a better score on their test? Did their kid score more points in the game? Did they pick the shortest and fastest checkout line? Did they make better time than the Google maps estimate?

On a couple of occasions Jesus had to rebuke his disciples for arguing about who would be the greatest in the kingdom. No doubt, James and John were at the center of these arguments, as it was plain that their intention was to be the greatest. Another incident in Mark 9:38-41 also shows their highly competitive nature:

*"Teacher," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." "Do not stop him." Jesus said. "No one who*

*does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, 40 for whoever is not against us is for us.*

Driven people look at others as threats, as someone who will take their accomplishment away from them. This can be very divisive in a church, and it can poison the ability to minister.

### **5. Driven People Often Posses A Volcanic Force of Anger.**

This is no doubt the case with James and John. Jesus even had a nickname for these two. Mark 3:17 tells us that Jesus called them “Sons of Thunder” They didn't get this name for their interest in the weather.

Driven people are so focused on moving ahead, that anything that prevents or hinders their progress really perturbs them. These volcanoes can erupt in the church when someone feels their vision or agenda is being threatened. This leads us right into the next characteristic of driven people

### **6. Driven People Posses Limited or Undeveloped People Skills**

If you want to see bad people skills in action, just look at these two. Just listen to what happens in the Gospel of Luke 9:51-56.

*As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him, but the people there did not welcome him. because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village.*

Driven people can be good at getting things done, but they can have a hard time working with others. They get impatient with others. They have a hard time seeing things through their eyes. Others who have to work with driven people are often intimidated by them.

### **How Can People with Driven Personalities Develop Christ-like Characters.**

Does this mean that driven people aren't good Christians? Absolutely not.

Any kind of personality has its positive as well as negative qualities. Anyone’s traits can serve themselves or they can serve God. We see in all of the apostles a variety of personalities, and we also see how Jesus molds them from being sinful, selfish people, into Christ-like, kingdom minded servants. The driven person is no different

#### **1. Learn To Use Your Competitive Tendencies to Build God's Kingdom, Not Your Own**

There can be a lot of tension for those who want to live like Christians, but they have a competitive nature. But Jesus showed us that these qualities can be used for good. He showed how you could lead, while serving. He showed how you could achieve, but with new standards of success. He showed us how we could progress, but according to God's calendar, not our own

God doesn't mind if we pursue the rewards of accomplishment, as long as we seek the right rewards. God has many rewards and blessings for those who serve the kingdom. Paul writes in Colossians 3:23-24:

*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*

You should seek to accumulate the fruit of the Spirit, and not merely the fruit of worldly success. You should seek the treasures of heaven, and not merely the trinkets of earth

Those of you who are highly competitive would do well to also remember who the enemy is. The enemy is Satan and the forces of evil. The enemy is the lure of temptation. The enemy is those things that lead people down the wide road to hell. The enemy is not someone in the church, even those who don't agree with you. I have read that when horses are threatened with an enemy they face each other and kick outward at the enemy, but when donkeys face an enemy they face outward and kick each other. Now let me ask you, which one does the church most often resemble?

Sometimes, people with competitive, driven personalities are suspicious or fearful of Christianity. They have a mistaken perception of faith. They think that becoming a Christian means becoming a doormat. But becoming a Christian doesn't mean you sacrifice excellence, achievement, and success. It just means these things are refocused on a whole new level. James and John are the perfect examples of this. Christ calls the most driven, competitive, high achievers.

If you have been keeping God at arm's length because you don't think you'd fit in, that you wouldn't belong, that your talents wouldn't be of use, think again. Jesus took James and John, two ruthlessly competitive brothers and transformed them into the core of his team of apostles. John went on to write the fourth gospel, three letters, and Revelation, all of which are some of the finest works ever put into written language.

The greatest success in the world is not what you can achieve for yourself, but the success that God can give you. In James 4:10 we read, *"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up."* You can work and strive and scratch and claw and climb your way to the top of whatever heap you're trying to get to the top of, or you can let Him lift you to where only He can take you.

## **2. Learn To Serve the Needs of Others, Not Just Your Own Desires**

This is one of the most important lessons that Jesus taught James and John. We saw earlier how these two tried to secure for themselves the two most prominent positions in what they believed would be Jesus' earthly kingdom. Listen to what happens next in Mark 10:41-45

*When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. 42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

This would be a lesson John learned so well that he became known as the apostle of love. He mentions love nearly 70 times in his 3 books, including 35 times in just the 5 chapters of 1 John alone. Listen to what John was inspired to write here 1 John 4:7-12.

*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us,*

### **3. Your Family Background Is Not an Irrevocable Mold For Your Life**

Many driven people have been raised to be that way. They were taught to be ruthless competitors. We can certainly see the influence of James and John's parents in their life In Matt. 20. We learn that it was their mom who convinced them to ask Jesus for the two most prominent seats in his kingdom.

There are many indications that James and John's parents were wealthy and influential. Their father, Zebedee was a powerful man. When Jesus was arrested, John was able to enter the courtyard of the high priest, while Peter was forced to wait outside. Only families with wealth and power had access to the most powerful man in the Jewish community

James and John inherited many things from their parents: they were uninhibited, bold, confident, and motivated, but they were also brazen, selfish, and short-tempered, but this wasn't an unchangeable mold that forever shaped their identity. "This is just how I am. This is the way I was raised," was never an excuse. Jesus transformed their lives.

He can transform yours too, even if you were raised to be highly competitive, and to be ruthless in your pursuit of accomplishment. Maybe you brought home a report card full of "A's" yet your parents got on your case for the "B." Maybe you went 2 for 4 in the ball game and drove in 3 runs, but your dad chewed you out for the one strike-out. Was nothing ever "good enough" in your home growing up? Jesus can pave a new path for your life. Don't use your upbringing as an excuse for not growing spiritually. You can begin to break that mold right now this morning

If you're a driven person, if you are a James or John, these are three steps you can take right here this morning. And the best way you can take that step, is to step out as we sing our song of

response and commitment. You can come forward this morning and come before God and man, and say I want to live for a new definition of success. I want to start competing for the right things. I want to start living for the right accomplishments. You can make the commitment right now, and we can pray for you, we can love you, and we can help you make that step. As our music ministry team comes up, let me leave you with this quote from

Bill Hybels' book *Descending Into Greatness*:

God asks us to lose so we can gain. He makes a hard request, then offers a promise. Lose your selfish ambition: I will honor you for loving others. Lose your addiction to things: I will provide for you if you seek Me wholeheartedly. Lose your obsession to be in control: I will give you power as you follow Me. Lose your appetite for thrills: I will startle you with pleasures you could never have found on your own. Lose your life: I will give you eternity.

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<sup>1</sup> Pfeffer, Jeffrey (2018) *Dying for a paycheck* New York, NY. Harper Business. pp. 13-14.