



CONFLICT AND ANGER

Anger problems are only one strand in the problem of interpersonal conflict. Angry actions and words often seize center stage in the midst of conflict, but an extended family of reactions each play their part in the real-life drama of fear, hurt, self-pity, gossip, lying, manipulation, etc... As sinners, we naturally contend for our presumed self-interest. When it comes to conflict, each of us is a “quick-study” because we have the aptitude for sin.

Looking into the Mirror of Scripture

The Bible is packed with stories about anger, conflict, and alienation – and how to solve such problems. Anything the Bible discusses freely must be a universal problem. Consider the representative “works of the flesh” Paul lists for us in Galatians 5:19-21. More than half the items describe some type of conflict. When it comes to interpersonal conflict, all of us are like participants in an AA meeting. Instead of “Hi. My name is David. I’m an alcoholic.” It should be, “Hi. My name is David. I get into conflicts.”

*Imagine if you will two people going at it. Imagine each to be two closed, large books banging against each other. Some are glancing blows, some are blows where one book sneaks up on the other book, and some are head-on-brutal blows. But the common denominator is that the two books continue their course of collision – BUT THEY REMAIN CLOSED. **The Bible intends to have a cease-fire with the conflict and open the books.***

James 3-4 helps us with this greatly:

1. The demanding self-exalting heart will always bear the fruit of chaos and conflict.
2. God is jealous for our loyalty, destroying his enemies, but gracious and generous to the repentant;
3. The wise, humble, receptive heart will bear fruit of a life of peacemaking

These themes appear in many variations. However, no more accurate, profound, and thorough analysis of the dynamics of conflict has ever been written. No more hopeful and condensed description of the dynamics of peace could be written. No more powerful promise of aid has ever been given.

Why Fight?

James 4:1-3 is designed to get you to open your own book. James does not blame the “other book” for fights. He blames YOU and YOUR DESIRES. **Nothing lies deeper than the lusts that lead to conflict. Our cravings rule our lives; they directly compete with god for lordship.**

Why do we fight? One reason. We do not get what we want. The metaphor envisions siege warfare. The picture is that of an army digging in around a city. Our desires become entrenched...hence we fight and wage war. We would act as peacemakers if we obeyed the Lord instead of asserting our desires. But where you find quarrels and fights, you are witnessing people obeying the desires of a different lord.

Who are you when you judge?

It is difficult for combatants to see the real problem. James 4:11-12 says we judge others – criticize, nit-pick, nag, attack, play God, condemn – because we think we are somehow on God’s level. Who are you when you judge? A God wannabe. In this we become like the Devil himself. One of the jobs of the Devil is that he is the “accuser of the brethren.”

What is an argument? In an argument, you cross ME and offend ME. I respond by telling you your faults. At the same time, I explain to you how my failings are really your fault. If only you were different, I would not be the way I am. You, of course, have a need to reciprocate. Nowhere in the heat of conflict does each person think it necessary to “confess his/her faults to one another. **TWO KEY THEMES LIE AT THE HEART OF CONFLICT: GRASPING DEMAND AND SELF-EXALTATION.**

Can we break it Down Further?

You will find that many arguments you have with those close to you are “patterned.” They are repeatedly triggered by the same sort of situation, and they play out the same themes, as if the two parties follow a script and act on cue. Let me give you a personal example from my life. As a counselor, I listen to people all day long. I try to have a sympathetic ear and a discerning mind as I listen. I cry with people and I laugh with people. My wife works with special education children in a school setting. She gets very little “adult interaction” during her day. When we get home we are both tired. My idea of a good end of the day is REST. For me, that means lying on the couch and watching a good ball game while enjoying a snack after supper. Meanwhile, what is Jan expecting? She has been praying for me all day long and borne with my preoccupation. She knows that I give others an endless supply of hospitality, patience, attentiveness, and biblical input in response to their needs and concerns.

For her, we finally have an opportunity to be together, an opportunity to talk intimately and personally. For her, it is a great time to PERSONALLY CONNECT. Do you get the picture? The northbound and the southbound trains are going to collide at some point. I am ruled by my pleasurable desire for R & R. Jan desires intimacy. *A question immediately rises in our minds. What is wrong with what I want and what is wrong with what Jan wants? **One of the things that keep our books closed is how plausible our desires seem to us.***

Great Expectations

“What is wrong with what I want?” Scripture, the Holy Spirit’s x-Ray of the heart, makes clear that when such desires rule, they end up producing sin, not love. God sees into the heart of conflict; He sees the private kingdom we each create. We each ascend to the throne, making our desires for blessings into the will of a god. *I crave. I need. This must be. **We are willing to quarrel in order to get peace and quiet!*** Often it is not the person’s object that is the problem; it is the encampment that corrupts. It is when I **want something too much that it begins to rule me, and I sin against the ruler of heaven and earth.**

Imagine glancing at a small, grainy, black and white photograph of the Grand Canyon, circa 1890. Now imagine actually standing at the mouth of the canyon rim from pre-dawn darkness until the full light of day. At first you peer down into inky blackness. But as the sky slowly brightens, impenetrable darkness gradually gives way to grey. You begin to discern the shapes and contours of the shapes below. You see dimly what was right in front of you all day long. That is what it is like to identify the specific lusts that characteristically produce your battles. You eventually see everything in vivid detail. Often we just look at the little old picture and are content to pay lip service to the fact that “specific sins are the fruit of specific lusts.” WE MUST FACE OUR OWN GRAND CANYON!

A Wonderful Pursuit

James 4:6 makes a staggering promise. “GOD GIVES MORE GRACE. GOD GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.” Grace is more and greater than sin. Every facet of the grace of God is meant to cleanse and renew angry, critical, fearful, proud people. It is our responsibility to seek this God in repentant faith. James 4:6-10 says this over and over.

James is distinctly unmodern in his solution to conflict. Moderns tend to talk about horizontal strategies: “clarify your expectations, listen well and speak back what you have heard, phrase concerns in non-condemnatory ways, count to ten before voicing anger, communicate respect, and watch your body language. James tells us to draw near to God. He says “submit to God

and resist the devil. Cleanse your hands and purify your hearts. Notice how present God is and how relational the solution is to be.

Peaceable Wisdom

What does this look like interpersonally? Formally _____ persons are enabled by God to seek love and peace. If you once attack people, you learn to interact constructively. James 3:17, 18 describe it compactly. It is "Wisdom from above."

PURE-Angry people churn out mental, emotional, and verbal pollution. They plot ugly things; their hypocrisy condemns others' failings while they themselves plunge headlong into spectacular sins.

PEACEABLE-Gentle, reasonable, full of mercy, and good fruits. Peaceable people have laid aside warlike traits: defensiveness, aggression, criticism, self-justification, and touchiness to offenses."

GENTLENESS- the English language has no full-orbed equivalent for the word translated as gentleness. Everybody that Jesus met owed Him life and utter loyalty. Yet, most of these people ignored Jesus, misunderstood Him, tried to use Him, reviled Him, and plotted against Him. How did He put up with all this? *GENTLENESS. It is a painful thing to be misjudged, but it is no more than Jesus puts up with every day.*

REASONABLE- People in conflict have distorted hearing and thinking. We tune in to the same wavelength we broadcast on, and it is the wrong channel. I'll listen for and speak whatever proves you wrong and proves me right.

FULL OF MERCY- Naturally those who repent of an angry, critical spirit become full of mercy. If I have found the mercy of Jesus overflowing toward me for spectacular and fatal sins, it is only natural for me to show mercy toward others for their lesser sins toward me. **Since God has been so patient with me, I shod also be patient with others.**

FULL OF GOOD FRUITS- The good fruits of peacemaking are as diverse as the evil works of war making. Scripture gives no exhaustive list of "good fruits," simply because it would be too long. The bottom line to everything James is saying is this: ***ALL PEOPLE IN CONFLICT ARE HYPOCRITES.***

James comment that peacemakers are *without partiality* is particularly striking. When people repent of sinful anger they become able to discuss their own sins accurately. Simultaneously, they become able to talk about other people's sins charitably. There is no more ax to grind, but an emergency desire for the well-being of the other in the hand of the merciful Redeemer.

WITHOUT HYPOCRISY- They do not stir up a whole evening of trouble and misery to get a few minutes of peace and quiet. People in conflict deal out global condemnation, while screaming in outrage whenever they are mistakenly criticized regarding some tiny detail of a story. Paul put it this way: *“And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God?” (Romans 2:3).*

Real Change in Real Life

The Grand Canyon. Standing there, you have a chance to “open your books.” Words come clothed in a different tone of voice. They carry a different attitude and intention. No longer adversaries and accusers, we begin to talk honestly about our own failings. We begin to love the love of Jesus and to pray for each other. There are three in our marriage, and One is Perfect, Good, and Merciful. He is at work. Wisdom is feet on the ground.

The closed book begins to slowly open as we look at conflicts in the process of resolution. If the “log” remains in your eye, you remain a slave to your encamped desires. The angry person is determined to play god, and in so doing plays the devil, rather than letting God be God, and so embracing the Redeemer’s agenda.

Walking by Faith

In James 3-4 the Holy Spirit repeatedly calls us to stand before the mirror and to see what is true. Faith takes God at His Word. **TO GET TO THE HEART OF CONFLICT, YOU MUST SEE YOURSELF AS GOD SEES YOU IN YOUR HEART. HOWEVER, YOU MUST ALSO SEE YOU AS GOD SEES YOU IN CHRIST.** Relate your life to God in faith, and He WILL rearrange your life. Take God at His Word. To get to the heart of conflict you must seek God. And if you seek, you will find. And you will change, because living faith can never prove fruitless: *“the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (James 3:18).*