

Exposing the Contentious Person

Proverbs 21:9; Proverbs 6:16-19

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I want to assure the ladies in our congregation that Solomon is not stating that women alone are brawlers within the home. The specific application of this moral truth is made to women, but the same moral truth equally applies to husbands as well as to wives (to parents as well as to children, to the aged as well as to the young, to the rich as well as to the poor). For example, in Proverbs 26:21 we read not of a contentious woman, but of a contentious man who stirs up strife. Wherefore, if a universal moral precept is given by God, it speaks to all people (even if it is specifically applied to only one class of people in the Scripture). Thus, as I proceed through this text in Proverbs 21:9, I will be applying this verse to all members of the family and of the church, and not to women only.

Contention and strife between family members, church members, and friends is as rottenness in the bones, for it decays and destroys love, peace, and healthy relationships. It falls under the category of one of the abominations which the Lord hates in Proverbs 6:16-19. There are many ways to sow discord among brethren, and the sin of contention is one of the chief ways to bring division and disunity into a family or into a church. Let us seek to crucify in ourselves all remnants of sinful contention as we embrace by faith alone the power of Christ's death and resurrection. From our text today, let us answer the following three questions: (1) What Is a Contentious Person? (2) Why Is It Better to Dwell in a Corner of the Housetop Than to Live with a Contentious Person? (3) What Can Be Done to Curb Contention?

I. What Is a Contentious Person?

A. The English word "contention" comes from the verb to contend which has in view to struggle, to strive, or to stir up controversy. Where our English text speaks of "a brawling woman" (in Proverbs 21:9), the Hebrew text says literally "a woman of contentions." This is precisely parallel to Proverbs 26:21 where it speaks of "a man of contentions" who kindles strife using the same Hebrew word for contentions (*madon*). Thus, this is a woman (or a man) who is characterized by contention, strife, debate, conflict, quarreling, arguing, and nagging. What are some characteristics of the contentious person? I dare say, if we look closely, we shall see some of these sinful traits in our own lives. Let none of us think that we never manifest any of these characteristics of contention in our own lives. For at various times, we are all contentious and desperately need the grace of Christ. In some contexts we have preferred and sought out conflict rather than peace and reconciliation.

1. A person characterized by contention is one who is looking for a heated debate, and so he/she pushes all the right buttons to excite the other person so as to bring this all about. It's like watching a pyromaniac with a box of matches who starts a fire in one location, moves on to another area, and does the same from place to place. You know he/she has been around because of the fires that have been started. The same is true with the contentious person. He/she does not have the wisdom to know what is appropriate to say to this person or to that person or when to say it. All caution is thrown to the wind and wherever this person goes there is a heated debate which requires others to follow behind them putting out the fires they have started. Like a parent who could literally follow behind certain children picking up one mess after another, so must a contentious person be closely followed for wherever he/she goes there is a mess to be cleaned up. Put him/her in this group and soon there will be an argument. Put him/her in another group and the same thing will occur, sooner or later.

2. Contentious individuals are people who must control situations. And they control the situation by pushing people to their “breaking point.” For when others are out of control, they feel like they are in control.

3. Contentious people must get their own way or there is a price to pay later on. It may be in the form of a temper tantrum, a relentless nagging, or even a vindictive silence. The goal is not peace and reconciliation for the contentious person, but victory in getting one’s way by wearing others down. The other person may even say, “OK, you win, I give up.” Those given to contention may even be able to control their own anger if it means winning. After all, it always looks better if the other person is the one who becomes angry while Mr./Mrs. Contentious sits there calmly having pushed the weaker one to the point of exasperation.

4. One characterized by contention uses and manipulates people by bringing them to the point of submission for their own sanity’s sake. They seem to have an unbounded energy and capacity to pursue relentlessly the prey until it falls over from mental fatigue and physical exhaustion.

5. The contentious person uses teasing and ridicule as a weapon to bring others to tears. He/She brings a person to submission by making them to appear very foolish.

6. Those who are contentious are busybodies—not respecting the privacy of others. No one can handle a situation better than they who are contentious (at least so they think). And the more information they gather, the more division, strife, and sorrow is left along the path that they travel.

7. Mr./Mrs. Contentious is not given to mercy toward others, forbearance with the weaknesses of others, nor loving one’s neighbor as oneself. He/she is not a servant, but a master.

B. Notice what the Scripture teaches about those given to contention.

1. They drive others away from them— particularly those with whom they are most familiar (Proverbs 21:9; Proverbs 21:19). People tend to avoid those given to quarreling and debating. You should be willing at all times to stand for the truth, but those given to strife will argue about the most obscure points of theology and defend them with their last breath (2 Timothy 2:23-26). Thus, they do not promote unity, but schism within the body of Christ. How much better, dear ones, to spend the precious time you have in being firmly grounded in the truths clearly revealed by the Lord in His Word (those truths summarized in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms).

2. Those that are contentious torment others like a continual dripping faucet (Proverbs 27:15). One form of cruel torture that has been practiced in some countries against political and religious prisoners is that of a causing a very slow drop of water to fall continuously and repeatedly on the forehead of the prisoner while strapped securely in place so that the head cannot be moved so as to avoid the drip. Although the drip of water does not physically destroy the prisoner, the relentless monotony of the drip, drip, drip for hours mentally and emotionally destroys prisoners. So likewise does the relentless nagging, pressuring, mocking, and debating of the contentious person.

3. Contention and its accompanying sins are listed as deeds of the sinful flesh (Galatians 5:19-21).

4. Consider the contention of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram in Numbers 16, who brought division into the ranks of Israel by contending with Moses and Aaron over their leadership in Israel. They were swallowed alive by the earth.

5. Remember the contention within the Church of Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:11; 1 Corinthians 11:18,30)? We who promote a covenanted reformation must learn to lead our fellow brethren out of division, enmity, conflict, and contention and into peace, reconciliation, and agreement in the truth. We must set the example, if we expect Christ to hear our prayers for worldwide unity in the Visible Church of Jesus Christ.

C. What is the collateral damage that contention leaves in its path? Contention leaves in its path division, disunity, rivalry, conflict, contempt and bitterness within the family, church, neighborhood, or workplace. Where love does not cover a multitude of sins—Where forbearance is absent in ministering to the weak—Where division between brethren reigns—there contention has had its way.

D. Let me clarify what contention is not before we move on.

1. It is not contentious to stand for and to fight for with one's whole life the revealed truth of Jesus Christ (Jude 3). However, you must speak the truth in love for others rather than in contempt for others—with meekness praying for reconciliation in the truth rather than with arrogance causing chaos and confusion. You will be taken for a contentious person (even if you are defending the truth) if you seem to be inciting others by your combative and provocative language. Dear ones, any fool can break the bones of his opponent with harsh, uncaring words, but it is the wise man who knows how to break the bones of his foe with soft and tender words (Proverbs 25:15).

2. It is not contentious to defend the good name of your brethren (or your own good name) when it is maligned and slandered (as did Jonathan for David when David was slandered by King Saul in 1 Samuel 19:4). Where was the righteous and courageous person to be found when godly Naboth was falsely accused of blaspheming God in order that Ahab and Jezebel might rob him of his life and of his property? Yes, you must defend and clearly oppose even the godly who have perverted the right ways of the Lord in some particular area, as when Samuel Rutherford and the Presbyterian Protesters opposed the covenant-breaking of the Presbyterian Resolutioners in Scotland and would not partake of their sins by meeting together in Presbyteries or General Assemblies. But before taking such steps, seek to win your adversaries with love, gentleness, humility, and the truth.

II. Why Is It Better to Dwell in a Corner of the Housetop Than to Live with a Contentious Person?

A. Our text speaks here of a man who finds it far preferable to sit in a very small corner of his flat roof (where meals may be eaten or a few guests entertained) than in a spacious house where many people might comfortably sit. Why would anyone prefer to be exposed to the rain, the sun, the scorching wind, or the freezing cold on his/her roof than to be safely hidden inside a comfortable house from all inclement weather? The roof is chosen in order to find some peace of mind from the constant and relentless conflict of a contentious wife/husband. To the same effect is Proverbs 21:19 (where the escape is into the wilderness to face not only inclement weather, but also dangerous animals).

B. Here is a most sad and deplorable situation because it happens between a husband and a wife who are bound together as one flesh. She who was given to be his helper throughout all of life has become his antagonist. He who was given to be her protector and defender throughout all of life has become her persecutor. It reminds us of Job's wife, who rather than standing with her husband chose to contend with him ("Curse God and die"). There are few miseries and heartaches in this life that are harder to bear than to find your enemy within your own bosom. And yet the Lord does not in our text condone either divorce or a permanent separation from a husband or wife because he/she is contentious. The only grounds for a lawful divorce are adultery and a willful desertion that cannot be remedied. Separation from a spouse may occur if one's life is endangered due to violence, or if one's vocation calls him away for a time, or if persecution for the faith should separate them, or if a period of prayer and fasting should be practiced by common consent.

C. What can be done in such a situation? Is it hopeless?

1. No, it is not hopeless, for with the Lord is abundant mercy and infinite power for both spouses (Ephesians 3:20). There is always hope because Jesus, the Peacemaker rose from the dead. There is

reconciliation because Jesus lives to restore not only lives to the living God, but to restore lives to one another that have been nearly destroyed by conflict, contention, strife, nagging, and ridicule.

2. In a moment I will share with you how this may be accomplished. But think with me—in light of the life-long commitment of marriage, how careful you young people must be in marrying one who will not be a relentless persecutor, but a constant friend. How important it is to know the character, qualities, and tendencies of one another during your courtship period. This commitment (outside of one's commitment to Christ) is more important than any other that you will make. You must look beyond appearance, education, and wealth and look to his/her love for peace and reconciliation in the truth. Not peace at any price, but a peace in the truth. Do you argue and quarrel frequently about matters of little consequence? Beware. Marriage will only intensify those differences. Loving peace and reconciliation in the truth is one of the most significant qualities to look for in a potential spouse.

III. What Can Be Done to Curb Contention?

A. Are you contentious? Ask yourself (not your spouse) the following questions (in other words, remove the beam from your own eye before seeking to remove the speck from your spouse's eye).

1. Do you enjoy a heated debate for debate's sake? Or do you engage in debate only when the truth of Christ or a neighbor's reputation is on the line?

2. When you see your spouse (or anyone else) is provoked to anger or to tears by your words, do you back off or do you pour it on?

3. Do you relentlessly pursue and follow your spouse around the house when it is apparent that he/she needs some space? Or are you willing to allow an hour or two for things to cool down and then peaceably seek to address the issue at hand?

4. Do you initiate the reconciliation process by confessing your sin or must you wait until your spouse has first admitted defeat?

5. Do you nag like a continual dripping faucet or do you speak the truth in love and wait upon the Lord?

6. Are you critical of your spouse or do you seek to encourage your spouse? Do you seek to expose the sins of others or to cover the sins of others whenever possible?

7. Are you angry if things are not managed in your specific way? Or do you allow freedom to others (where ever possible)?

8. Is winning a quarrel more important than settling a difference and being reconciled?

B. What should you do if you have a contentious spirit?

1. Honestly confess it as a sinful weakness in your life and earnestly seek forgiveness and repentance from Christ. Ask the Lord to give you the sincere desire to overcome this sin and to hate it as God hates it.

2. At the beginning of the day preview the questions above so as to avoid contention. At the end of the day reflect on the questions above so as to repent of your contentious ways and seek the grace of God.

3. If you are married, ask your spouse to love you enough to pray for you and to point out where you are contentious inside and outside the family. If you are not married, ask a trusted friend to help in this area.

4. Learn to encourage others and help others rather than criticizing them.

5. Become a peacemaker rather than a troublemaker by seeking to put out fires rather than to start fires. Initiate reconciliation with love and meekness rather than waiting for others to first admit defeat. If you live with a contentious person follow the steps just enumerated. The Lord wants to use you as a peacemaker in your marriage.

6. Look to Jesus Christ who loved peace and reconciliation in the truth to such a degree that He was willing to lay down His own life to secure it for all those who put their faith and trust in Him (Ephesians 2:14-16). It is sin, error, and rebellion against God that causes dissension, division, and contention in this world. This is the root problem that has been quietly accepted among professing Christians throughout the world. Various denominations of professing Christians within the same nation are the result of contention due to sin and error rather than the result of reconciliation due to love and the truth. If you would rid the church of all such contention, you must begin with your own heart, your own family, and your own congregation. If it does not work there, it will not work anywhere else. May the Lord make us a congregation where we are known as peacemakers (as was our Lord) rather than troublemakers.

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