
Conflict in Community

James 3:13-4:10

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How do we know who are the good leaders in the church?

By how much they know? How much, who and what they have read?

By how much education they have? How many books they have written?

By how much power and influence they wield? Who they know? Who knows them?

The Bible turns many things on its head. No more than on this topic. The Biblical, mature leaders in the church emerge in the midst of conflict. Our text helps us to see that.

The Meekness of Wisdom

(v. 13-18)

The Test

(v. 13)

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

Here is the question. It arises in the context of concerns about the desire to be teachers and the failures to control the tongue. So who will step up to answer the question? How do we know who these people are?

Here is the answer. The true leaders in the church know how to be pleasing to God in the midst of conflict.

He is marked by good conduct. His behavior in conflict shows that his beliefs and desires are submitted to God and pleasing to God.

His conduct is marked by wisdom. He knows how to connect choices with consequences. He speaks and acts with wisdom.

His wisdom is marked by meekness. Meekness is the virtue where a person knows they are right but is content not to strive in order to get what they believe is right. It is a kind of strength, not a kind of weakness.

So the godly leader, with meek wisdom, believes and behaves in a way that is pleasing to God. Now, what is that going to look like? James gives us a negative and then a positive picture. It is fairly evident that they represent people in the church and among the scattered saints he is writing to.

The Troublemaker

(v. 14-16)

¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

Here is the TROUBLEMAKER. These verses are the clearest admonition of the person causing trouble in the church James is pastoring. We need to guard our own hearts lest we this describe us as well. Here is what the false wisdom looks like.

Has a reputation for wisdom and understanding that is not borne out by meekness and good conduct.

Has bitterness (long-term, unresolved anger) against people, particularly against those who have thwarted their ambitions in the church.

Carefully hiding it, is often behind division, discord and disorder in the church.

So the sinful, evil leader in the church is the one who craves to be first and thus reflects the ambitions of Satan and the false wisdom of the world who fosters all kinds discord and division. Is this you?

The Peacemaker

(v. 17-18)

17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Here is the PEACEMAKER. The truly mature person whose wisdom is from has a completely different way of thinking and acting. They are “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere”. Their life and wisdom is marked by efforts maintain peace, harmony and unity but not at the expense of holiness, honesty and sincerity.

Godly leaders are those who, in the midst of conflict, are holy in life. They have a peaceable and gentle way about them. They are willing to listen, to be persuaded. They are merciful to their opponents and do good for them. They are not oriented by external bias. They are genuine and transparent, without hidden agendas or hypocrisy.

The difference is quite clear. The wisdom from above produces a harvest of righteousness. That harvest comes from the seeds sown by those who love peace.

The Source of Conflict

(4:1-4)

Quite naturally then, James goes on to show us the source of conflict between people.

1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? 2 You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. 4 You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

Conflict between people comes from craving and desires that in people. In essence people go to war with one another in order to get what they really want.

The Personal Particulars

The illustrations James uses here are related to the person causing trouble. That person is rich, respected, prominent and given deference. He is also prideful, arrogant, sharp tongued, and impatient. He has a reputation for being a wise person but is in fact a troublemaker. From other indications in this book and from the situation of the church in Jerusalem, I believe he has control of the money set aside to help the needy. That fund in the church at Jerusalem had been quite large but now not needed so much (see Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 5:1-11). These phrases probably relate to requests for help from that fund.

I know that it is common to apply this text to prayer and asking from God. I see little here that would support that. This has to do with helping one another. I also detect aspirations for ministry. This may also be functioning in the realm of desiring and assigning ministry responsibilities.

- Some are not getting the help they need because they refuse to ask. They may be afraid to ask. But they harbor anger and bitterness that their desires and needs are not met. They won't ask and therefore don't receive.
- Some are asking out of greed, covetousness and ambition. They are pressing forward to get what they want. They are driven by the world's values. They are influenced by friendship with the world.

Their lust for "stuff" is spiritual adultery. All of this puts them at war with God. Listen. When you, because of what you crave and want, will have conflict with other believers, you are in conflict with God. This principle is true. To be a friend of the world is to be the enemy of God. There is no middle ground. It is not possible to be neutral. And it works it way out in the church.

The Practical Principles

Conflict between people is always a heart issue.

We go to war with others because of a desire, a craving in our hearts. We want or don't want something so badly we will attack someone else. This principle is a universal. It functioned in the fall of Satan. It was powerfully driving Eve in the Garden. It deep desire for acceptance by God on his own terms drove Cain to murder his brother. In this text, that story is the anchor for his theme. The language James uses evokes Cain and Abel as well as Jacob and Esau.

This desire driven conflict functions at all human levels – from babies to fighting over toys to nations fighting over land or power or control.

When you are in conflict with your spouse, your children, your boss, your employees examine your own motivations. Your warring desires must be submitted to God. You may feel entirely justified. And may be in the right. But with rare exception, conflict at this level is not pleasing to God.

Ministry itself may be the tempting and testing situation for conflict.

Sadly, this is so. Many, many churches and ministries have gone to war with each other over power, agendas, resources and preferences. People will think their

particular wisdom, preference or desire is *right*. They will go to extraordinary lengths to be sure that the people do what they want.

We desire to maintain harmony first. This means we must always submit our desires to God and be willing to put the other person first. Unless it is clearly mandated in the Scripture, then we will choose what is best. We will listen to advice and counsel and pray that God gives all the leaders wisdom. So difference and discussion, even earnest ones are welcome as long as we do so in way that is pleasing to God and results in harmony. James is going to talk about that next and for us, next week.

Worldliness in people and in ministry will make God their adversary.

Worldliness is often associated with Fundamentalist legalism. To be worldly was to look like and to act like the unconservative elements of culture. The problem with this is that this is not what the Bible means. Worldliness to live by the values and vanities of the world. If the conservative way you dress, or act, or vote is based on a conservative world view and values, you are still worldly. Christians are to live Christianly. Our view and values come from the Word. They are lived in the world.

James here basically says that any Christian or Christian ministry who governs itself seeking to have the world's approval has become the enemy of God. We are not seeking standing in the world. And our desires are not to be poured into the world's mold. To do will surely lead to folly, sin and conflict.

Christians must watch two extremes in their walk with God and with God's people.

We must be willing to ask for help when we need it. To not do so is simply, pride. We are independent, self-sufficient and self-reliant as a society. Christians are often unwilling to simply say, "I need help..." And, so, God's means of practical provision for you is short-circuited by your pride. Repent. Humble yourself. Ask.

We must be careful when asking for help that we have not misspent what God has given us. If you buy nice things and then come and ask the church to help you with your house payment or utilities, this is condemned by James. Do not expect the church to take care of you when you have misspent your money. Or even worse, do not ask for help in order to free money for material things.

So many of you are going to have to reevaluate how you think about this text. I know this is different from what has been taught here in the past. For certain, let us be very careful of lifting sentences out of their context and then making them say something they don't say in their context.

The Necessity of Humility

(v. 5-10)

⁵ Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? ⁶ But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." ⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

The Root of Desire

The first sentence at first is difficult. But when paired with the one before it its meaning is quite clear. We are adulterers if we seek the friendship and approval of the world. This puts us in conflict with God. Why? The Lord longs for the exclusive loyalty of His people because He has put the Spirit in us.

At the root of desire that leads to conflict is pride. God desires to have exclusive loyalty in our hearts. Pride is loyalty to ourselves. It is boasting in us, not in God. Proud people will be much more prone to having conflict with others. So we are called to a cycle of receiving grace and humbling ourselves.

Pride is the devil's sin. You will constantly be tempted to pride (which will sound like self-congratulation in your heart). You will watch yourself. You see yourself at the center of things. You tell stories about yourself. You try to draw out the praise of others by boasting or bragging.

The Reversal of Pride

Repent. Push the devil away and draw near to God. Wash up. Be grieved over your pride and your sin. Humble yourself. God will lift you up at the right time.

This was the call to the man and his followers whose pride had fueled the difficulty in the church. But this call comes to us as well.

Humility receives God's grace.

Humility puts others interests first and is willing to set aside our own preferences, agendas and desires.

Humility seeks God's kind of wisdom and pursues peace and harmony.

Humility will quietly and firmly deal with conflict.

Humility will submit to God, resist the devil, mourn and repent of sin.

Humble yourself before the Lord.

The Condemnation in our Judgments

(4:11-12)

Well we can use our tongues to teach others, to make war against others, to elicit praise or pity from others and finally to pronounce judgments against others.

¹¹ Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹² There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

Simple, powerful, clear, unmistakable conclusion to this whole thing. Don't speak evil against another Christian. Period. We get that (not that we always obey it).

But James is also telling us something important that is a bit difficult to see. Let me put it this way: when you pronounce judgment against someone else you are trying to act as a bad judge in a court. Instead of upholding what God requires, “the law”, you are speaking against the law.

Someone has helpfully written, “In the light of his teaching in this context how would we answer the question? ‘I am a person seeking to walk in the lowliest humility with God, for I know that this is the way of blessing. I have learnt that the way down is the way up. I seek for myself the lowest place.’ But if we exalt ourselves over a brother, is not the reality of our life with God called in question?”¹

Judging someone is one of the following:

- To speak what you know is not true about them; all lying about others is a form of judging.
- To say they have done an evil when they have not; all slander is a form of judging.
- To hold them accountable to a higher standard than the commands of God’s Word. Most legalism is a form of judging others.

So I repeat James’ question: who do you think you are, judging your fellow Christian?

Reflect and Respond

Control your tongue. Keep your talk pleasing to God.

If you are in conflict with someone, please, examine your heart. What do you want? I mean, what do you really want? Do you even want a good thing so bad that you will cause conflict to get it? That is sin.

What are you striving for? What is your ambition in the church? What do you want more than anything? How much of your pride is behind that? Are you willing to humble yourself? I mean – are you willing to do the lowly things, take the lowly place, do the hard, grinding work until God raises you up?

Let us stop judging one another. In all the ways we can, let us be very careful to speak the truth in love.

May God give us many who show in the midst of conflict God’s kind of wisdom.

¹ Motyer, J. A. *The Message of James: The Tests of Faith*. The Bible Speaks Today. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985.p. 160