
Getting to the Heart of Conflict: Anger, Part 3

By David Powlison

Conflict concerns all of us: you, me, the people with whom we live and work. This is the third in a series of articles on anger problems,¹ but this time we'll broaden the subject beyond anger, *per se*. Anger problems are only one strand in the larger problem of interpersonal conflict. Yes, angry actions and emotions often seize center stage in conflicts, but an extended family of reactions each play their part in the real-life drama: fear, hurt, self-pity, gossip, avoidance, escapist comfort-seeking, lying, manipulation, even perverse joy.

To understand and solve anger problems, we must deal with conflict in all its forms. People fight with each other and with God; sinful anger is but one of the weapons. We fight our neighbors and our Ruler, both by nature and by nurture. As sinners, we *naturally* contend for our presumed self-interest. We also *learn* how to fight more effectively by extensive and intensive practice. And we learn from others, both by experiencing their hostilities and by watching how they fight. Each of us is a "quick study" because we have the aptitude!

Warmaking is a prime trait of sinners. It's the image of Satan: liar, murderer, divider, aggressor. Peacemaking is about God in Christ and about human beings renewed in His image. The Lord is the supreme Peacemaker. Even in His common grace, God inhibits the outworking of evil's logic, often preventing human life from disintegrating into anarchy and barbarity. Those forms of partial peace negotiated and

sustained by diplomats, mediators, counselors, and other well-intended people are gifts of common grace. But God's special grace is even more profoundly about peacemaking. Warlike humans surrender to Christ. He made peace once for all between us and God; He continues to make peace, teaching us to do the same with each other; and He will make peace, finally and forever.

This article will weave together several things. First, we will look at the Scriptures, and several key truths the Lord teaches us about war and peace. This involves asking the questions, "When *God* looks at your conflicts, what does He see?," and "How does *God* make right what is wrong?" The Scriptures reveal God's gaze, the criteria by which He continually evaluates human life, and they also reveal the means by which human problems are redeemed. I will also encourage you to look at yourself, and will give tools for pursuing change. What do you do that perpetuates conflict? Why do you fight? How can you pursue reconciliation? Real change happens when biblical truth and personal honesty intersect in repentance, faith, and obedience.

Looking into the Mirror of Scripture

Let's begin with Scripture. The Bible is packed with stories and teachings about anger, conflict, and alienation—and how to solve such problems. Anything the Bible discusses frequently must be a universal struggle. We may each put our own spin on sin, but the basic sins indwell us all. For example, Titus 3:3 offers this general assessment of the human race outside Christ's rule: "Spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another." Not a pretty picture. Some people are more civilized about it, some

¹The first two parts of this series of articles on anger appeared in 14:1 (Fall 1995) and 14:2 (Winter 1996) of the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*. A fourth installment, dealing with counseling methodology, will follow.

less, but all look out for Number One in some fundamental way, and collide with others looking out for the same thing.

Consider the representative “works of the flesh” that Paul lists in Galatians 5:19-21. More than half the items describe some aspect of conflict: “enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying.”² Consider also 1 Corinthians 10:13, “There is no temptation that has overtaken you

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that is not common to all.” When it comes to interpersonal conflict, all of us are like participants in an AA meeting. Instead of, “My name is David and I’m an alcoholic,” we could well introduce ourselves, “My name is David – or Sally, Joe, Chung, José, or Lateesha – and I get into conflicts.”

Think about it this way. Imagine that you hold two fat, hardcover books, one in each hand. One book stands for you, the other for the person you quarrel with – your brother or sister, parent, child, spouse, roommate, pastor, coworker or boss, next door neighbor. Imagine that you bang the two books together. One closed book beats against the other. Two people go at it.

The battle may take a hundred forms. Maybe one party wheels out the heavy artillery of direct verbal or physical assault; maybe the other tends to run and hide. Some conflicts are mere skirmishes; others are all-out nuclear war. Maybe one or both parties go around enlisting allies: would-be counselors are prime candidates for such service. Appeasement appears as the strategy of choice in one situation, bullying in another. Maybe one person uses suicide bombs: “I’ll drink and mess up my life, and then *you* will feel bad.” Sometimes the arguments get nasty, like a 48-inch pipe gushing raw sewage. Other times it’s just a dripping faucet of derogatory attitudes and snide words: snip, snip, bicker, bicker, pick, pick. In any event, the two books collide. But in every case, the books are *closed*. Each party blames the other and feels the unassailable logic of self-righteousness and self-pity. Neither stops

²The sins of conflict play a major part in every representative list of sins. See, for example, Romans 1:29-31, 2 Corinthians 12:20, Ephesians 4:31, Colossians 3:8, and 2 Timothy 3:2-4. In the Ten Commandments, each of the horizontal sins – disrespect, murder, adultery, theft, false witness, coveting – can express some form of interpersonal conflict.

to open his own book and ask, Why am *I* fighting?

The Bible intends to separate the combatants and open the books.³ The Holy Spirit speaks and acts to bring intelligent conviction of sin. Consider Hebrews 4:12-13. All of us lie open, laid bare before the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. God sees exactly what’s going on. His assessment is accurate and inarguable. The Word of God, living and active, discerns those thoughts and intentions of the heart that the Searcher of hearts sees and evaluates. What does He see when He “opens the books” of individuals in conflict?

We could look in many places, but James 3-4 is the classic, extended passage that speaks the mind of Christ to this issue. James 3 begins by reminding us that we are accountable for what we say. James, writing as the servant of God, notes the significance and power of the tongue: a small rudder sets the course of an entire ship. An unchecked tongue has devastating effects: a spark can ignite a forest. James exposes the hypocrisy of claiming to know God while attacking those made in His image.

Then, in James 3:13-4:12, the Holy Spirit summarizes the problem and solution: (1) The demanding, self-exalting heart will 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. 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. James 3-

³As an aside, it is often desirable to counsel a husband-wife or family together. Both sides of the story are available; mutually provocative and reinforcing patterns of sin can be discerned; reconciliation can occur. However, I don’t believe that counselors must make it a matter of principle always to see people together. The principle of insisting on seeing people together sometimes arises from secular sources (the philosophy and habits of family systems therapy) and sometimes from Christian sources (a commitment to honor the corporate identity of marriage and family). I think there are times to separate the combatants, and to bring to the fore that each person stands accountable before the face of God. If a man and wife refuse to be constructive when together, separate them. Remember that some people use the counseling context as an occasion to perpetuate conflict and gather ammunition. Others use it to do surveillance, watching that the truth is suppressed, cowing the weaker partner into silence about what is really going on. With recalcitrant or manipulative people, don’t hesitate to dig in one-on-one (Matthew 18:15), and return to group meetings when they are committed to be constructive.

4 places us in the light of the unrelenting gaze of God, and promises grace upon grace.

Why Do You Fight?

For example, James 4:1-3 is intended to get each quarreling party to open his own book. James asks the question, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" *Why* do you fight? James does NOT say, "You are fighting because the other person is a blockhead; because your hormones are raging; because a demon of anger took up residence; because humans have an aggression gene hardwired in by our evolutionary

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history; because your father used to react in the same way; because core needs are not being met; because you woke up on the wrong side of the bed and had a bad day at work." Instead, James says, you fight because of "your desires that battle within you. You want something but don't get it." The biblical analysis is straightforward and cuts to the core. *You* fight for one reason: because you don't get what you want. It does "take two to tango." So why are *you* in the dance? You fight because *your* desire, what pleases or displeases *you*, what *you* long for and crave, is frustrated. When Scripture enters on the scene of conflict, the colliding books are no longer closed. Each is laid down on the table and opened up before God.

The world gropes after this truth and, at the same time, runs from it. Any secular marriage and family therapist can point out how people get into conflicts because of crossed "expectations." Such a therapist can often get people to articulate what their (perhaps previously unspoken) expectations really are. They may even help clients to evaluate and alter some of those expectations, thus creating a more harmonious climate. But the problem of self-centered craving is not really addressed. Clients simply find other, less problematic ways to get what they want. In any case, the conflicts that cry out for a repentant heart before God are dealt with by suppressing the truth of what is really going on. Secular counselors may be descriptively insightful, but they cannot see the anti-God drive that operates within such interpersonal "expectations."

tations."

The irony here is that, in my experience, people with a secularizing bent find the Bible too obvious and simplistic. "Of course" people get angry when they don't get what they want; there must be something "deeper" to really explain problems. But secular psychology misses the core issue; it plucks out its own eyes. The expectations that lead to conflict reveal something fundamental about where the combatants stand with respect not just to each other but to God Himself.

Contrary to secular assumptions, nothing lies "deeper" than the lusts that lead to conflict. Our cravings rule our lives; they directly compete with God Himself for lordship. No problem is more profound and more pervasive. James 4:1 says that such God-playing desires "battle" within us. This does not mean that desires battle *against* us or *with* each other. These are *our* desires, expressing who we are. The metaphor envisions siege warfare, an army digging in around the 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?

There is nothing superficial, obvious, or simplistic about the Bible's analysis. Combatants don't see the real problem. Neither do would-be counselors who try to explain and help them while ignoring the Bible. This understanding of the profound sin that drives interpersonal conflict is further explained by James 4:11-12. We judge others—criticize, nit-pick, nag, attack, condemn—because we literally play God. This is heinous. "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you to judge your neighbor?" Who *are* you when you judge? None other than a God wannabe. In this we become like the Devil himself (no surprise that the Devil is mentioned in James 3:15 and 4:7). We act exactly like the adversary who seeks to usurp God's throne and who acts as the accuser of the brethren. When you and I fight, our minds become filled with accusations: your wrongs and my rights preoccupy me. We play the self-righteous judge in the mini-kingdoms we establish: "You are so stupid, cruel, insensitive, selfish. You've gotten in my way. You don't get it. You are a hindrance to my agenda."

What is an argument? In an argument, you offend ME by crossing my will. I respond by confessing your offenses to you. At the same time, I explain to you how all my failings are really your fault. If only you

were different, I wouldn't be the way I am. You do the same to me, confessing my sins to me and excusing your own. Nowhere in the heat of conflict does anyone confess his *own* sins, except as a way to buy time for a counterattack: "Yeah, I was wrong to do that, but...." The log remains firmly planted in the eye (Matthew 7:1-5) as each party plays lawgiver and judge. "But there is one Lawgiver and Judge, He who

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is able to save and to destroy. Who are you that you judge your neighbor?" Here we see that at the heart of interpersonal conflict, a far more profound conflict rages: the presumptuous sinner stands at odds with the one true God.

James 4:1 and 4:12 sound the two key themes that lie at the heart of conflict: grasping demand and self-exaltation.⁴ Each of us says, in effect, "My will be done, and damn you if you cross me." To find God's solution to conflicts, you must ask and answer the questions, "What do I want?" and "How am I playing God in asserting my will?" Such a profound and explicit analysis of the "vertical dimension" in interpersonal conflict provides the key that begins to unlock it. As long as we remain only in the "horizontal dimension," there will be no genuine and lasting peace.

For this reason, all secular forms of peacemaking are inescapably shallow. Without the vertical dimension, at best one makes compromises born of "enlightened" and mutual self-interest. Humility before the living God and love for neighbor are impossible, and not even dreamed of. But where conviction of sin before God occurs, genuine peacemaking becomes not only possible but logical. Yes, the other person may

⁴These themes weave through the entire passage. Sin's grasping, desiring quality is captured by "bitter zeal, pleasure, lust, envy, asking" (3:14, 16; 4:1-3). Sin's self-exalting quality is captured by "selfish ambition, pride, playing God" (3:14, 16; 4:6, 11-12). That sin is fundamentally an enmity and betrayal against God is captured by "adultery, friendship with the world, double-mindedness" (4:4, 8), as well as by the explicit usurpation that God-players attempt. That sin conforms to the image of Satan is captured by its "demonic" character and by the submission to the Devil that animates it (3:15; 4:7)

have started it; what he said and did to you may indeed be worse than what you said and did back. But when God opens the books, He shows you *your* participation in the conflict, what you bring, by the pride of your god-playing and willfulness. God's perspective reveals how the wills of two petty gods lie at the heart of those quarrels and fights.

Come Honestly to the Giver of Grace

We have looked into Scripture, at how James relentlessly dissects conflict and opens up an unsuspected dimension. Now let's look more specifically at ourselves, and at the dynamics of grace. I would like to begin with a story. One of the first conflicts that my wife and I solved actually involved four small arguments in a row. That is significant in itself. You will find that many arguments 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. In our case, things got tense between Nan and me on four successive Sunday evenings in June. We had been married less than a year, and I was working as a summer intern in our church. Let me set the stage, first from my vantage point, and then from Nan's.

For me, Saturday was a busy, high-pressure day. I was focused on preparing for Sunday's events. Many activities would come to a head throughout that day. Sunday morning I got up early to finish preparing to preach, teach, and lead worship. The day was intense, filled with many responsibilities and with people, people, people. I'd talk with people, listen attentively, express care and concern, try to help, pray. I'd counsel both informally and formally. In the afternoon we often extended hospitality. I often had to preach in the evening or lead worship, so further preparations—both finalizing content and collecting my soul—would fill the late afternoon. After the last conversation had ended, Nan and I would get home about eight o'clock Sunday night. I had one thing on my mind: *rest*. I defined rest as the peace and quiet to savor the sports page, to sip a tall glass of iced guava juice, to nibble my way through a handful of Fig Newtons. I was ready to close up shop on relating to fellow human beings.

Meanwhile, what was Nan experiencing? For the previous two days she had supported her husband in all the things he had to do. She had prayed for each of my responsibilities, and had borne with my preoccupation. She had watched me talk with other people, offering them a seemingly endless supply of hospitality, patience, attentiveness, and biblical input in response to their needs and concerns. She, too, had

been active in hospitality or teaching Sunday school. Now we finally had an opportunity to be together, an opportunity to talk intimately and personally, an opportunity to look at the week ahead and do some planning and praying. Come Sunday night at eight o'clock, Nan had one thing on her mind: *personal connecting*. She wanted a sympathetic and listening ear, someone to hear how *her* weekend had gone, to bear *her* burdens and share *her* joys, to walk arm-in-arm into the next week.

Do you get the picture? There's only one train track but two trains heading towards each other. The northbound and the southbound trains are due to collide at precisely eight o'clock Sunday evening when we arrive back home! You can see exactly what's going on in terms of James 3-4. Joe Pastor and Josephine Pastor's-wife are not a pretty picture at this moment. What was the cause of the quarrel, the unhappy bickering, the self-pitying sense of not being understood and loved, the self-righteous sense of offense? Is it not your pleasures, your cravings, the expectations that have dug in deep in your soul? I was ruled by my desire for pleasurable R & R. Nan was ruled by the desire for intimacy. The all-too-predictable result? A weekly quarrel.

A question immediately rises up in most minds, particularly in the participants to conflict. What's wrong with what I want? In the story above, isn't rest one of the commandments of God? What's wrong with wanting to enjoy the good gifts of food, drink, and leisure at the end of a long day, and before the week that lies ahead? Isn't sabbath refreshment, laying burdens down, one of God's good blessings? And isn't intimacy, a husband's nourishing and cherishing his wife, the mutuality of bearing burdens and sharing joys, one of the commandments of God? What's wrong with wanting your husband to care about you, too, along with all the other people he talked with at church? Isn't being loved one of God's good blessings? One of the things that keeps our books tightly closed is how plausible our desires seem to us.

(Too) Great Expectations

What's wrong with what I want? Scripture, the Holy Spirit's X-ray of the heart, makes clear that when such desires *rule*, they produce sin, not love... and so they show themselves corrupt. 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 each had fallen prey to sin's insanity and self-defeating futility. I was willing to quarrel in order to get peace and quiet! Nan was willing to quarrel in

order to get intimacy! Often it is not the *object* of a person's desire that is the problem; it is the "encampment" that corrupts. There is nothing *per se* wrong with wanting either rest or intimacy. But when I *want it too much*, when it rules me, I sin against the Ruler of heaven and earth. When our expectations dig in, we inevitably sin against each other, too. "I've gotta have it! It's mine! I demand my rights. I need to meet my needs. You're getting in the way of my precious, cherished longings! You're messing with my program to control reality. You're not meeting my expectations."

What do you want? How are you playing God? Those are not exotic questions, meant to send you on some introspective idol-hunt or an archeological investigation into shaping influences from your past. Ask the questions straightforwardly. They have an objective, present-time answer. You aren't probing for a subjective experience, a feeling, an elusive moment of insight. You want something as tangible and as fatal as Ebola virus: "What exactly do you want that makes you warlike, when Christ's rule would make you peaceable?" Answer honestly, and you will have identified WHY you participate in sinful conflict.⁵ There are no deeper reasons for your sinful anger. Violation of the "first great commandment" is the deepest motive of all.⁶ In moments of conflict I *loved* rest more

⁵This is not an article on constructive conflict, one of the great joys of human existence. Constructive conflict does not destroy people and compound problems; it faces and solves problems, and has the net effect of building people up both individually and corporately (Ephesians 4:29). The first article in this series discussed the difference between righteous and sinful anger in detail. Much of that discussion can be adapted to the differences between destructive and constructive interpersonal conflict.

⁶Our culture abounds with attempts to find something "deeper" than our antipathy to the true God and compulsive self-assertion of substitute gods. Such "deeper causes" – unmet needs or longings, shaping experiences, genetic endowment, indwelling demons, the configuration of the stars, etc. – are typically attempts to evade the God-relatedness of all human life.

Of course, some factors that contribute to a conflict may have a history that long predates the present moment. For example, consider a man who was often manipulated, used, and misused by others in his past. He is currently ruled by a determination never to bend to another's will. It's as if he's "armed." A highly sensitive motion detector triggers alarm bells of panic at the mere hint that his wife might make a demand. Rage spews forth like a flame-thrower on a hair trigger when she even mildly disagrees with him. Understanding the historical antecedents helps explain *when* the craving for control entrenched itself in his heart, but doesn't explain *why* he is so volatile. The disproportionate intensity of present reactions arises from the heart's present cravings, but it certainly recalls previous experiences. Wise counseling will not only address present conflicts, but also will tack-

than I loved the living God; Nan *loved* personal connecting more than she loved the living God. My outward sins in the situation included a grumbling attitude and critical words, but those works of the flesh erupted from the craving for my own utopian version of time off. Nan's outward sins included a grumbling attitude and critical words, but those sins poured out

*I was willing to quarrel
in order to get peace and quiet!*

of the craving for her own paradise of marital intimacy.⁷ For both of us—as for all of us—the horizontal sins register and express the vertical sins.

Those vertical sins are so serious that they merit the blunt labels the Spirit uses in James 3:13-4:12: “bad zeal and selfish ambition,” “pleasures, lusts, and envy” “adultery” against God (i.e., idolatry), “love of the world,” “pride,” “double-mindedness,” and “playing God.” We are meant to live with God on the throne, with a wide-open heart to Him and others. But a contentious, judgmental person has shriveled up inside, becoming closed and hard to both God and neighbor. In attempting to ascend to the throne of judgment and control reserved for God alone, he becomes perverted, corrupted, polluted. He becomes, in fact, Satanic. He acts in the image of the accuser of the brethren, an adversary of the well-being of others, an unlawful bringer of destruction, a tyrant and vigilante. On the outside, a contentious person speaks rotten words that tear down rather than build up, that deal out condemnation rather than give grace (Ephesians 4:29). On the inside, a person swept up in sinful anger has become demonic and diabolical—in the truest sense—an image-bearer of the great and wrathful critic of God's people (James 3:15, 4:7). God intends a different image, that we become bearers of mercy, redemption, and aid to others, even—particularly—in their sins.

What happens when warmakers come to see the

le previously unresolved conflicts during which particular patterns of craving became hard-wired in the heart.

⁷This general pattern is explicitly stated in James 1:14f: specific sins are the fruit of specific lusts, and bring God's judgment. James 3:14-4:12 takes this pattern and works it in greater detail regarding the sins of interpersonal conflict. This article attempts to take that detailed pattern and work it into the personal details of real people having real problems.

significance and scope of this inner dimension of conflict? We are brought up short. We are humbled for specific sins before the face of God. The Searcher of hearts catches us by the collar and makes us look in the mirror. No wriggling away. Imagine glancing at a small, grainy, black-and-white photograph of the Grand Canyon, *circa* 1890. That's paying lip service to the idea that “specific sins are the fruit of specific lusts.” Now imagine actually standing at the canyon rim from pre-dawn darkness until the full light of day. At first you peer down into inky darkness. But as the sky slowly brightens, impenetrable darkness gradually gives way to gray. You begin to discern the shapes and contours of the abyss below. You see dimly what was right in front of you all along. That's what it's like to identify by name the specific lusts that characteristically produce your battles. Finally, as the sun breaks forth, the rocks begin to glow with every color of fire. The canyon blazes, and you see everything in vivid detail. That's specific conviction of what is true: “My anger at you—not only my cutting and defensive words, but the dismissive attitude, the negative, damning spin I put on everything you did, the positive, justifying spin I put on my own performance, the evasions, the gush of self-righteous and self-pitying emotions and thoughts, all these and more—expressed my diabolical pride against God and my restless demand for what I want.” James 3:14-4:12 has been overlaid upon the details of real life.

Pursuing Grace

What happens next? James 4:6 makes a staggering promise: God gives more grace. God gives a greater grace. God gives grace to the humble. Grace is more and greater than sin. When god-players admit the truth, they find amazing grace in Jesus: forgiveness, mercy, sanity, a fresh start, cleansing, power, freedom.

Every facet of the grace of God is tailored to cleanse and renew angry, critical, fearful, proud people.⁸ Those who are living deformed lives, the spitting image of the Devil, can find the “double cure.” In Jesus, those who seek will find forgiveness for such sins. The just anger of God will turn away from the sinfully angry, falling instead upon the only innocent man. In Jesus, those who ask will receive the Spirit who makes the dead alive and makes the warped

⁸Interpersonal conflict is one of the archetypal sins, like overt religious idolatry, disrespect for authority, sexual immorality, theft, lying, drunkenness. Understand anger through God's eyes, and the cure of anger by Christ's gospel, and you'll understand how both sin and redemption work in practice. That understanding will generalize to all sorts of other problems.

straight. They will be re-formed into the image of the Son who died for us that we might live for Him.

What must you do? Angry people must seek this God in repentant faith. James 4:6-10 says that over and over. The Lord proposes a radically “vertical” solution for the radically vertical problem of the heart. It is interesting how relentlessly God-centered this solution is. Submit to God and resist the devil, rather than *vice versa*. Draw near to God. The devil will flee and God will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands (from those outward expressions of sin, the “chaos and every evil practice,” the “quarrels and conflicts,” the “speaking against one another”). Purify your heart (from those inward defections, the double-mindedness that professes God but serves gods). Grieve over what you have done. Humble yourself in the presence of the Lord. Notice how *present* God is. Notice how *relational* the solution is. We need to seek and find Someone who will be gracious, Someone with the power to help us. To really solve the heart of conflict is to enter into God’s presence. If our conflicts were fueled by our usurping God’s place, peace will be produced as the grace of Jesus Christ reinstates God’s rule in our hearts.

James is distinctly unmodern in his solution to conflict! Moderns tend to talk about particular horizontal strategies: “clarify your expectations, listen well and repeat back what you’ve heard, phrase concerns and objections in non-condemnatory ways, count to ten before voicing anger, communicate respect for persons amid disagreement over issues, watch your body language.” There’s nothing necessarily wrong with these strategies. Properly defined, they may be timely applications of James 3:17-18. Standing alone, however, they are seriously inadequate. Although they tend to make for more harmonious social life, they skim right over the heart of the problem. James’ solution cuts to the core of what’s going on in conflict. Solving the “religious” core gives the recipient of grace the power and humility to pursue strategies that lead to genuine peace.

Peaceable Wisdom

What does this look like interpersonally? Formerly angry people are enabled by God to give love and to make true peace. If you once attacked people, you learn to interact constructively. James 3:17-18 describes it compactly. God the gracious Giver gives “wisdom from above” (cf., 1:5, 1:17, 4:6). It is *wisdom*: practical, specific, walked out, talked out. It is a way of life, the opposite in every respect to the words, tone, thoughts, actions, and attitudes of sinful anger. And it is *from above*, the gift of God through the Lord

Jesus Christ. He alone gives the goods that truly solve interpersonal conflict. If you lack wisdom—and “quarrels and conflicts” are prime examples of folly—ask God (James 1:5).

This wisdom He gives is first *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. Contentious believers have

People in conflict have distorted hearing and speaking.

hearts that are dangerously divided: impure. But repentant believers begin to live a life that is pure. Simple. Straight. Pursuing the good and true. Out for others’ welfare. Giving your life away. Not calculating self-interest in the background.

Godly wisdom is first pure, and “then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, without hypocrisy.” How many more ways can James say it? *Peaceable* people have laid aside warlike traits: defensiveness, aggression, criticism, self-justification, scoring points, touchiness to offenses....These moral weeds—the “filthiness and remnant wickedness” that comes from the “anger of man” (James 1:20-21)—are plucked up by the roots and begin to wilt. Sweet fruit begins to grow as the Word of God and other good gifts take root: teachability, forbearance, kindness, concern that others look good, contentment and gratitude for the inexpressible gift, an outlook of charity rather than peevishness. May the Prince of peace make us “irenic” (the Greek word here), replacing our instinct for contentions, quarrels, and criticisms. Jesus Himself is peaceable, the incarnation of every facet of this wisdom from God.

The English language has no full-orbed equivalent for the word translated as *gentleness*. Jesus exhibited this trait so remarkably that its fragrance and coloration marked His entire life. Here walked the Lord of glory with His own creatures. Every human being that Jesus met owed Him life and utter loyalty. He is YHWH, to whom temple sacrifices were offered in repentance and gratitude. Yet most of these people ignored Jesus, misunderstood Him, tried to use Him, reviled Him, plotted against Him. Even His own intimate followers, who basically loved Him, repeatedly proved themselves dense as stones. How did He put

up with it for thirty-three years?! Gentleness.

Jesus dealt gently with the ignorant and misguided, even when He suffered at their hands. He was meek: a virtue almost beyond our imagination, the ability to endure injury with patience and without resentment. I have known several people in whom I saw demonstrated the first fruits of this virtue. Their lives showed hints of radiance, a glimpse of the unveiled glory of Jesus, the loveliest thing I've ever seen. Jesus was fundamentally and comprehensively kind, "going about doing good." We can understand to a degree that He was compassionate towards sufferers. But when we consider that the Christ's master purpose was self-sacrificing mercy for His enemies, here the gentleness of Jesus exceeds comprehension. George MacDonald once captured the fragrance of such gentleness this way: "It's a painful thing to be misjudged. But it's no more than God puts up with every hour of the day. But He is patient. So long as He knows He's in the right, He lets folk think what they like - 'til He has time to make them know better. Lord, make my heart clean within me, and then I'll care little for any judgment but yours!"⁹ It is unfortunate that "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" has become largely a phrase of mockery, picturing someone weak and ineffectual, a sentimental, pabulum savior for children. But may the God of the Lord Jesus Christ give us His true gentleness, making us meek and mild. Such incomparable, forbearing strength is a regal attribute. This glorious goodness—cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded—is precisely what James 3-4 intends to produce in you and in me, people so quick to take and cause offense.

The wisdom from above is also *reasonable*. It has never ceased to amaze me how reasonable Nan starts to sound once both she and I begin to repent of sinful anger. People in conflict have distorted hearing and speaking. We tune in to the same wavelength we broadcast on, and it's the wrong channel: I'll listen for and speak whatever proves you wrong and proves me right. But peaceable people send and receive on a different wavelength: what makes for growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Wisdom makes sense. It's listenable, accurate, constructive, winsome—even when it says tough things. But angry people are insane and perverse. You don't talk sense when you are contentious; malice and distortion subvert and pervert even the attempts at truth. You can't talk sense with a contentious person. But you can say anything that's true and constructive to a wise

person and you'll get a fair hearing.

Naturally those who repent of an angry critical spirit become *full of mercy*. If I've found the mercy of Jesus overflowing towards me for spectacular and fatal sins, it's only natural for me to overflow at least a little with the same mercy towards others for their lesser sins against me.¹⁰ The more deeply you get to the heart of your participation in conflict, the more you will understand with joy the mercy of God to you. And you'll become correspondingly merciful and patient towards others in their sins. If God has been so patient with me, I can be patient with my neighbor. Angry, critical, feisty, irritable people typically don't much understand this mercy of God. They can mouth the words, but their actions reveal that a lie inhabits

*If God has been so patient with me,
I can be patient with my neighbor.*

their hearts. They still serve lusts. And others will pay the full price for perceived transgressions. It has been interesting and humbling for me to ask myself, "Towards whom am I full of mercy, and towards whom am I merciless?" I have to give a mixed answer: persons ABC are on the mercy list, and persons XYZ are on the merciless list. The difference between the two lists has little to do with the people's particular strengths and failings. It boils down to my "expectations," to whether I view that person through the lens of the Redeemer's merciful agenda or through the lens of my own instant and insistent demands. May God be so merciful as to make me and you persons with only the mercy list.

You will become *full of good fruits* also, as you learn to make peace rather than war. The good fruits of peacemaking are as diverse as the evil works of war-making. Scripture gives us no exhaustive list of good fruits. No list could ever capture the many creative, timely, and appropriate things that repentant people do and say as they learn to make peace. Keep your mouth shut, when you used to blurt out a reaction. Speak up courageously, when you used to get intimidated. Embed your criticism of another in both appropriate commendation and Christ-centered optimism. Treat people fairly, representing them accurately and recognizably, rather than misrepresenting them. Speak

⁹George MacDonald, *The Marquis' Secret*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 1982, p. 58.

¹⁰Mercy can even flow towards those who did not sin personally against me, but whom I have treated mercilessly!

accurately, abandoning prejudicial language; “always” and “never” are rarely true and usually more destructive than constructive. Speak calmly, rather than with gusts of inflammatory emotion. Speak strongly, rather than inhibited by timidity. Raise an issue you used to swallow. Overlook an offense you used to explode about. Solve the problem rather than attacking the person. Expect to see Christ at work, rather than despairing or panicking when troubles come. The gentle answer turns away wrath, replacing the harsh words that stir up anger. When you get the log out of your own eye, you really can see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.

People in conflict are hypocrites.

Odds are, he’ll trust you as you do it, and he’ll love you for it. The cornucopia overflows.

James’ comment that peacemakers are *without partiality* is particularly striking, and points out something I’ve never heard discussed. I’ve noticed that when people repent of sinful anger they become able to discuss their own sins accurately – after all, such sins now exist in the light of Christ’s grace and will be progressively destroyed by grace. Simultaneously, they become able to talk about other people’s sins charitably. There is no more ax to grind, but an emerging desire for the well-being of the other in the hand of the merciful Redeemer. Impartial people become able to sort out who really contributed what to the overall problem. Such even-handedness stands in marked contrast with the polarization of conflict. I recently witnessed a wife discussing her own sins without defensiveness, and the sins of her husband without accusation. Simply, utterly amazing! They had been at each other’s throats, full of anger, disappointment, defensiveness, and self-pity only one week before. Changing her husband, punishing him, fearing him, getting one up on him were no longer her prerogative. She was free to get about the business of being a constructive help in the process, rather than a destructive hindrance.

Finally, peacemakers are *without hypocrisy*. They don’t stir up a whole evening of trouble and misery to get a few moments of peace and quiet; they don’t stir up an evening of hostility to get loving attention. They don’t judge others for Little League versions of sins against themselves, thereby committing major league versions of sins against God. People in conflict are

hypocrites. They deal out global condemnation, while screaming in outrage whenever they are mistakenly criticized regarding some tiny detail of a story. They grouse about a spouse spending \$20 on some perceived frivolity, while they don’t think twice about spending \$500 on their own hobbies. They damn others as theological nincompoops and biblical ignoramuses, while they themselves subscribe to theological “distinctives” that are at best dubious and at worst flat out wrong. They accuse others of harshness... harshly; they get angry at angry people; they haughtily judge proud people; they gossip about gossips. May God be merciful to us all. “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). God gives more grace... to those who stop to look in the mirror and get to the heart of their participation in this world at war. That grace is effective to make real change, in real time, with real people, in real situations. He who is pure teaches us to purify ourselves. And the pure are without hypocrisy.

Real Change in Real Life

Just as God’s diagnosis maps onto real life, so we live out the cure into real life, real time. Nan and I talked differently after our “sunrise on the Grand Canyon” than we had talked before. Words came clothed in a different tone of voice. They carried a different attitude and intention. No longer adversaries and accusers, we began to talk honestly about our own failings. We began to love the love of Jesus, and to pray for each other, and to worship the Merciful One. There are three in our marriage, and one of us is perfect, good, and merciful. He’s at work. Wisdom is feet-on-the-ground, every-word-out-of-your-mouth practical. We were enabled to make practical, problem-solving decisions.

There is nothing so unromantic as love.¹¹ Romantic feelings of attraction and pleasure will sometimes be associated with love, but the essence of love is different: a commitment to act for another’s welfare. As we solved our Sunday night bickering, Nan actually *wanted* to give me rest, and I actually *wanted* to spend time with her and give her personal attention. We decided, as a matter of policy, to define Sunday night as a time of private rest, and to take Monday morning as a time of extended and open communication. Interestingly, as a matter of fact, over the rest of the summer, we ended up informally “connecting” on about half the Sunday evenings anyway. Somehow when

¹¹I am indebted to Andrée Seu for this phrase.

the lust for R & R was dethroned, I didn't "need" private peace and quiet so much. And, not surprisingly, when the lust for intimacy was dethroned, a lot more intimacy just seemed to happen. Those typical surprises occur when people get to the heart of conflict and find the needed grace.

Does this mean we never bickered again? Would that it were so! But the burning cinder of iniquity must be extinguished daily (Luke 9:23), not once and done. During that summer almost twenty years ago, Nan and I were given a road map to the fountain of life and were enabled to find grace. We gained an enduring understanding of characteristic sin patterns, and tasted the joys of repentance and godliness. Such understandings are repeatedly beneficial. When we sin afresh, repentance is much less haphazard. We're familiar with what's going on. We know the terrain, and where to go. We needn't stumble around in the dark so long before seeking needed grace. Many potential conflicts have been nipped in the bud and turned into nourishing companionship. But we are far from perfection, even more aware of that fact than we were twenty years ago. On the day we see Christ, we will be like Him, all who are in Him. From that day on there will be no more causes of stumbling, no more "quarrels and conflicts." The process of getting to the heart of conflict will one day be finished. Simple and pure devotion will replace double-mindedness forever.

What Happens to the Closed Book?

We've been looking at conflicts in the process of resolution. But what about people who refuse to see themselves, who continue to accuse others and excuse themselves? In effect, they pluck out their eyes. They attempt to keep their book shut tight, while bringing vigilante justice to those they hate. They won't look into the mirror of the Word illuminated by the Spirit. What happens when the "log" remains impaled in the eye? You remain a slave to your encamped desires: "If only my wife would change and see that I'm tired and need to rest....If only my husband would change and see that I'm lonely and need his love...." Irascible people remain incapable of love, digging ruts of bitterness, self-righteousness, self-pity, entitlement, unhappiness, perhaps escapism, perhaps that fruitless search for the greener pasture of lusts fulfilled.

I've done personal ministry for twenty years, and have spent thousands of hours talking with people. In that time, I've gotten to know some champions of anger, rage, self-righteousness, and the rest of the sordid clan. In my informal "Hall of Shame," the five angriest people each said something like this: "I'm not

really an angry person....I was really a nice guy until I met my wife/husband....I get along great with the people I work with. But that woman/man drives me crazy!" Such comments express deep darkness; he doesn't know over what he stumbles. Such a person really IS an angry person, contrary to self-perception.

*Faith lives as though
what God says is true.*

That anger expresses cravings that Christ would expose and uproot. Praise be to God that His common grace has allowed such a person to be reasonably civil much of the time, rather than perpetually criminal. But "that woman/man" has been given to bring the heart into open display. The comment speaks volumes about a person's ignorance of reality, ignorance both of himself and of God. The spouse doubtless has sins, perhaps serious ones. But the angry person plays god, and in so doing plays the Devil, rather than letting God be God, and so embracing the Redeemer's agenda.

Leisure time and personal connecting—like control, money, vindication, power, success, being loved, health, significant accomplishment, and the like—are seductive and dangerous masters. When thwarted, their anger takes a thousand forms, sometimes showing its face openly, sometimes hiding. But when tyrant lusts are overthrown by grace, then rest, intimacy, and the like simply become good gifts. They are gifts to give away to others in the true freedom of the "golden rule"; they are gifts to enjoy when we receive them. They are nothing to live for, to claim, to need, to long for, to organize life around. God has good things in store for His children. The best gift is freedom from the guilt and dominion of sin in order to know God Himself. Along the way, He will give the true version of every lesser good sooner or later.

Walking by Faith

In James 3-4 the Holy Spirit repeatedly calls us to stand before the mirror and to see what is true. He repeatedly beckons us with promises: "God gives more grace. He opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Let those words be stamped on your heart. Faith takes God at His word. Imagine yourself down to the last \$100 in your savings account. The next wave of bills has arrived in the mail, and must be paid. That night your soul flutters with anxiety. You lie

awake, mind running in circles, calculating and recalculating, planning and imagining. The next morning, out of the blue, your banker calls you and says, "Someone just wired \$10,000 into your account. The money's available, so live accordingly....Yes, it's in *your* account....No, there's been no mistake." Would you keep worrying? Or would you get about the business of paying your bills with a glad heart? Get about business.

Faith lives as though what God says is true.¹² God *does* give more grace to the humble. Humble yourself.

*To get to the heart of conflict
you must seek God.*

God *does* oppose proud warmakers. Come out with your hands up and surrender. He *truly* forgives those who open their eyes to their sins. Stop, open your eyes, confess. He sealed His promise in the blood of Jesus. Count on it. He *actually* gives the Holy Spirit to His children who ask. Ask. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all men generously and without reproach" (James 1:5). Ask unafraid, knowing your need. "You do not have

¹²I am indebted to Bob DeMoss for this phrase, and for the metaphor in the preceding paragraph.

because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask...to spend it on what pleases you" (James 4:3). Ask, repenting of your lusts. God Himself will empower fruit-bearing. He gives wisdom to walk in the image of Jesus Christ.

The humble faith that makes for peace is just as objective as the proud craving that makes for conflicts. Many people view faith as their *feelings* of trust, confidence, peacefulness, contentment, happiness. Many people view prayer as an *experience* of certain religiously colored emotions: fervency, stillness, joy, familiar comfort. Such feelings are sometimes associated with faith and prayer, but the Psalms illustrate how the faith that talks to God can express itself in many different feeling states, some pleasant, some rather unpleasant. And we should never forget that many forms of falsehood may feel peaceful or fervent or confident. The state of your emotions is no accurate register of whether you are actually relying on God.

The essence of living faith is something different than any particular experience: seek the true God who speaks truth. Faith takes God at His word and acts on it. There is nothing so unexperiential, unmystical, and unsentimental as faith. But robust, straightforward, simple faith is powerful. Relate your life to God in Christ, 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'll 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).