

Understanding Quarrels

September 19, 2021

Fr. Jacob Bush

One interesting thing about having children is listening to them argue about stuff. Any parent knows that the arguments are fruitless, and never the result of anything good. In fact, usually they are due to one child taking something that the other child has laid claim to. Or they are the result of jealousy. One child gets something, so another says, "Why does he/she get what they want but I cannot have what I want?" But no matter the reason, these conflicts happen throughout childhood. Unfortunately, conflict often continues into adulthood.

Because of sin, conflict is inevitable in this life. It manifests itself in different ways. Sometimes it manifests as war. Sometimes it manifests as arguing. But the root cause of conflict is wrong behavior or wrong thinking. And it always causes a rift in what should be a good relationship.

We might expect this to be true of a community of people who do not know the Lord. Unfortunately, conflict happens even in the Church, and is also the result of wrong behavior, wrong thinking, wrong motives. Such conflicts are also caused by sin in one or more of the people involved. As the people of God this should not be true of us. We should be setting the example for everybody else. We should be quarrel free.

We might be tempted to think that this was better or worse at different time periods throughout history. We want to compare our day to another day in age to say that we aren't as bad. Or, conversely, to dump on ourselves and think that we are worse. The reality is that we are not better or worse than believers in any other time period. But conflict is something that we need to be on the lookout for, and something to put an end to.

Doing so requires us to get at the source of the conflict. James makes this clear in his Epistle. In chapter 4 verse 1 James points out the source of these conflicts. "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?" Quarrels and conflicts are the direct result of our choosing to fulfill our own wants and desires rather than seeking after God's will. Why is it important to know the source? Because in order to eliminate the problem, you have to know the source of the problem.

Think of it as a wart. Disgusting, I know, but it illustrates the point. With a wart you cannot just go after it without attacking the source or it will reappear. The same is true of weeds. If you pick only what you see on the surface and do not get rid of the root, the weed will reappear. You must get rid of the root in order to be rid of the weed. The same is true with conflict and quarrels. You must get to the root of them in order to keep them from reappearing. Don't attack the symptoms, attack the root.

The root of quarrels is sin, ultimately. Sin wants to remain hidden. It likes the darkness. If we cannot see that it is present, we won't fight against it. Our job is to shine the light of Christ on it. When we shine the light on darkness the darkness goes away. When we call out sin, there is nowhere for it to hide, and we can be rid of it by being humble and by confessing it as sin and submitting ourselves to the Lord.

And understand too that it is Christ that takes away our sin. We submit ourselves to Him and He removes the sin. He is to with respect to sin what the Orkin man is with respect to bugs.

When the Orkin man comes over, we have the option of allowing him access to the whole house or just part of it. If we grant access to all of it, we stand a good chance of being rid of the problem. If not, then we don't. Same thing with Christ. If we remain humble and give Christ access to every room in our heart, He will thoroughly cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we withhold access, then we are holding on to sin and cannot expect the situation to change.

However, we don't just confess our sin in general terms. We need to be specific. It is a good habit to seek the Lord when we have confession during service, and to be specific about the sin(s) that we are confessing. James pointed out that the root of quarrels, while is sin in general, is specifically our pleasures that wage war in our members. And he goes on to list the specific pleasures, namely lust, envy, selfish ambition. As believers we should never allow any of those to take root in our lives. Such things grow and invite other sins to take root in our lives. All of these are about self without any concern for anybody else. We make it about our will instead of God's will.

The question is, as disciples of Christ, whose will are we to be seeking? Is it our own will or God's will? It is God's will. The longer we are in Christ, the more our will should conform to God's will. That is the goal. Sometimes we could think and say that we are just wanting God's will, when in reality we just want recognition for ourselves. We just want to be the one with the answers. We are being arrogant! But remember that the fruit of our lives tells us whose will we are seeking after.

James tells us in chapter 3 verses 13-18 how to tell the difference between wanting the recognition and wanting God to be glorified. Verse 13, "Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom." Good behavior. Gentleness. Two marks of a person who is meek. A person who is meek is not aggressively defensive. A person who is meek does not return insult for insult. A person who is meek relies on God for everything to fulfill the role he or she has been given by God. And does so with confidence that God's will will be accomplished in every situation. A person who is meek does not feel like they are in competition with anybody else, and their behavior and speech show it.

Gentleness is also listed as a fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22-23, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law." All of the fruit should be evident in our lives. When we are facing conflict, we are to exhibit all of these. We exhibit love for the other person. We maintain our joy. We act peaceably. We act with patience, and some translations say long-suffering instead so there's the concept of no limit to our patience. We are to be kind and good towards the person. Remain faithful to God and to the other person as their brother or sister in the Lord. We act with gentleness. And we exhibit self-control by not saying the things our flesh wants us to say and by not doing the things our flesh wants us to do.

James continues in verses 14-16, "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing."

As I said earlier, sin has a way of leading to more sin. Jealousy and selfishness lead to arrogance and deception. When we become all about self our every thought and action become self-serving. When we become like that, we have to be arrogant because it serves our selfish ambition. Which of course leads to more arrogance because we are naturally not wrong in our thinking and behavior. We have to lie because the actual truth is not flattering to our ego. The truth says that we don't know everything. But if we don't know everything then we are no more important than anybody else. Which means we are on level ground with others. Which means we have the same cause, the same interest. We are on the same page. If we are on level ground with others than there can be no quarreling, no conflict.

James continues in 4:2-3, "You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." Again, sin leads to more sin, and specifically lust leads to murder, envy leads to fighting and quarreling. So, we lust after something or someone that another person has, and obviously we are better than that person, so we get angry and commit murder. Now this is not literal murder. But remember that God's standard is so high that we are not innocent before Him if we entertain angry thoughts and have words spoken in anger. We have broken His law.

Listen to what Jesus said as we find recorded in Matthew 5:21-22,

You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

James is reminding the Church about God's standards when he states that lusting leads to murder. No doubt some thought, "I want such and such. So what? It's not that big a deal." But the Lord said, "No. This is a very big deal." This was a serious issue in the Church at that time, and I'm sure we have all witnessed this same issue today. It should not occur. We should be esteeming others as better than ourselves, not the other way around. There should be peace and harmony in the Church among the believers, not quarrels, conflict and strife. We should ask God for what we want and need with the motive of bringing honor and glory to the Christ, not so that we could look and feel important and get the praise and adoration ourselves.

Now James is speaking about quarrels with respect to those in the Church. Obviously as believers we are in a different place than unbelievers. We have a different perspective than

those who are not disciples of Christ. There will almost inevitably be some conflict between believers and unbelievers. But there should never be quarrels between believers.

We should look and act different than those who are worldly because we serve Jesus Christ. Our lives should bring Him honor and glory and praise. James drives this point home in 4:4, "You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." Are we enemies still of God? No! Then, we cannot be a friend of the world. When James says that he is not saying that we cannot be around people who are not believers. He means that we cannot do the things that the world would have us to do. We cannot sin against and be hostile towards our fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord, and so sin against and be hostile towards God.

Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. And we are reminded of that in James 4:5, "Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: 'He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us'?" See how James ties it all together? If the Holy Spirit lives in us than we must exhibit the fruit of the Spirit and not the fruit of sin.

Obviously, none of us are perfect. We all struggle. And we would all fail if not for the fact that we have Christ. But if we remain humble, God gives us the grace to live this out as James states in verse 6, "But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, 'GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.'"

If we are humble too, we will, as James states in chapter 1:22, not merely be hearers of the word, but doers of the word. We will apply God's word to our daily lives. If we find ourselves in conflict with another believer, we can remember this word from the Lord and realize that sin is at the heart of the issue. We can initiate a seek and destroy mission when it comes to the sin in our lives by allowing Christ to point it out to us and take it away. And when we do that, it will be easier to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, and the quarrel will end. That humility makes all the difference when it comes to handling conflict. And others will see that and wonder how it is that we can live in harmony with one another. God's will will be accomplished in the situation. And He will get all the praise and glory.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!