

Handling Conflicts Wisely

Rich Nathan

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Growing Into Maturity

James 3:13 - James 4:2

This morning we are going to continue in our series from the book of James. As many of you who have been here know, the theme that we have been focusing on from the book of James is the theme of spiritual maturity. God wants us to grow up before we grow old, to quote John Wimber. It is not enough to just step over the line and barely make your way in.

We have had lots of people stepping over the line here in the last year. I believe we have baptized over 200 folks, which is good. But we need to move onto maturity.

In the section that we are going to look at today, James takes up the topic of conflict. I would remind you that James was no stranger to church conflict. You see him in the midst of two of the great conflicts in the early church, mediating and arbitrating. James knows what he is talking about. He is in the middle of the conflict regarding how Gentiles would be admitted to the primarily Jewish church in Acts 15. He exercises all of his peace-making and mediating skills in resolving the various factions. Then you see James again working out a peaceful solution to Paul's journey to Jerusalem and the stir that that was causing among Jewish believers in Jerusalem in Acts 21. We see him at the forefront of resolving disputes in the church. He is no stranger to conflict. Frankly, anyone who has been around church for any length of time is no stranger to conflict.

I want to open today with a little illustration of a typical kind of conflict that can arise in a church. I am borrowing some of this from a Conflict Management firm headed up by a man named Norm Shawchuck. I have modified for church purposes.

A woman, let's call her Cindy, walks into a meeting of her Bible study group that meets on Saturday morning. She announces to the group, "I am not going to come back here to this group anymore. I don't need to spend Saturday morning in a nursery changing diapers and holding crying babies. I could do that at home with my own baby. The reason why I come here is to get a break. By the way, I am not the only one who feels this way. I have talked with several other women and they said that if they are put in the nursery to watch the babies during Bible study time, that they are not coming back to this group either."

Immediately five other women in the group respond to Cindy's attack. One of the women tries to solve the problem right away. She says, "Well, the reason why we are not hiring baby sitters is because some of the women in the group can't really afford to pay anymore money for this group. But how about this: How about if one week we hire baby sitters and the next week some of the women rotate through?" She tries to split the difference.

Cindy is not satisfied. She says, "Forget it. There won't be any splitting the difference here. Either we are put off the nursery team, or we are walking."

A third woman raises her voice and says, "I really don't think that we should be disagreeing here." She looks down at the floor and nervously around the room. "I think that perhaps it would be better for us to focus our attention on the women's breakfast that is coming up." After several more minutes of the women still arguing with each other, this third woman finally says, "I need to leave. My son has to be taken to an appointment." And she scurries out of the room.

A fourth woman sitting there says nothing. She smiles pleasantly at everyone in the group. She says nothing through the discussion and disagreement. When she leaves the meeting, however, she immediately shares her thoughts about how the group is being led, some of the problems going on in the group, with a friend of hers who is not part of the group. Also, she identifies names and specifically talks about Cindy and how she made this big pitch and how upset she was with what Cindy was doing in the group. She just spreads it around.

The leader of the group is an older woman. She is sweet, mild, and cuddly. She immediately takes the whole problem on herself and says, "Cindy, this is all my fault. I should have planned last year for raising money for baby-sitting this year. I really haven't been a good leader. I think I should pay for the baby-sitting for the year for the group." Even though the leader is on a fixed income and is a widow, she is going to take the whole burden of paying for everyone's children on herself.

Finally, one of the women who is a seasoned veteran of church conflict stands up and says, "No, I don't think it would be appropriate for you to pay for everyone else's children. But I do think we need to talk here. Cindy, what exactly are you upset about? Let's hear you."

Typical conflict in a group. Typical kind of thing that happens in a church and then it gets magnified and spread around. What I would like to do is to describe this group. By the way, so that you don't think there is any sexism here, this could have been a men's group and we could have changed the issue from childcare to the golf outing or the men's retreat. But I would like to describe the behavior of this group in terms of the animal kingdom, because very often I think that when you walk into the midst of a group of folks in the church, it is almost like, "Welcome to the Zoo."

Think about how these women related to each other. Cindy comes in with her ultimatum. Essentially it is "my way or the highway." She is a lion or shark. If you don't do what I say, I am going to bite your head off. I have to win at all cost. Even if everyone else has to lose, I get to win. My position has to win the day. I am not interested in discussion.

Then there is the fox that tries to finagle a deal. The second woman who spoke up and said, "Well, maybe we can split the difference here." It is not always wrong to split the difference. If you are deciding on snacks after a woman's conference and someone proposes cookies and another woman says, "A lot of us are trying to lose weight and if all we serve is cookies then some of us won't be able to eat." It is okay to say, "Why don't we have two trays: the junk-food tray and the health-food tray, and then everyone will be happy." Sometimes it is right to split the difference. Sometimes, of course, that is just a way for us to not hear people's real problems, when we leap to a solution right off the bat.

Then, of course, there is the turtle. The woman who just wants to end the conflict. "We shouldn't be talking this way. Let's focus on another issue." The turtle who avoids disagreement and pulls her head in and looks to the ground, getting nervous around any kind of conflict. Often, turtles, people who withdraw, come from abused backgrounds. They learned how to keep their head down, because if you pulled your head out in their homes growing up, or maybe in their marriage, you got it smacked. You were screamed at. So they have learned to pull it in and withdraw.

The fourth woman, who I found the most distasteful, is the snake. She is the woman who sits and smiles, says nothing, and lets everyone believe that she is on his or her side. She then goes out and with poisonous intention attacks the other women in the group to anyone who will hear. Doing it in, perhaps, a spiritual way. She is concerned. She is hurt by some of the behavior of these women. She can't talk to them, so she bites everyone outside.

The Bible study leader who wants to pay for everything, why she is just a cuddly teddy bear who wants to hug and mother everyone. Of course, if you want to mother everyone and care for everything, you can prevent people from growing up in the Lord. You can stop spiritual maturity. If you are the type of person who must go to the rescue and must solve everyone's problems, you never teach them to solve their own problems. A wise and good leader tries to get people to grow up and act like Christians.

The last woman who speaks up, the woman who said in a gentle, but confrontational way, "Cindy, let's talk here. Before you bolt and run from the group, we need to hear your concerns because you are obviously upset about something." This woman is not afraid of conflict. She doesn't think that the sky will fall if we have a disagreement. She understands that often conflict is the result of God wanting to do something in a group. She also understands that conflict is sometimes inevitable because people come from different places and have different perspectives and different gift mixes. She knows that there is a godly way to resolve conflicts. She is the wise owl.

Guess what they discover. They discover that Cindy is exhausted when they hear her. She is up half the night with her baby who is colicky. She can barely drag herself through life. She really does need a break from spending a third of her time in a nursery. This is a needed time for her.

They also discover that women in the group really can't afford to pay more. The wise owl proposes a solution. "Let's put together a fund raiser for this group. We will hold a garage sale together at my home. Let's bring over all of our stuff and we will be able to afford to pay the child care for everyone."

The garage sale is held. They raise \$600.00. The childcare is provided. There is peace in the animal kingdom.

This morning, as we move on in our study of the book of James, we are going to learn about handling conflicts wisely, like that old owl. But first, let's turn to the Lord in prayer.

James 3:13-James 4:2

"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the

devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God."

We need to remember the context of these remarks of James. Last week we talked about our speech and how our speech can be used in the church to encourage other people and to put strength into them or to kill. It could be inspired by either God or the enemy. Last week we talked about bridling our mouths.

The whole cultural setting about speech and the one we are looking at today about wisdom, it is set in the context of conflict in the early church community. Some of you have had conflict in the church—in this one or in another church in the past. Some of you may be undergoing conflict right now. But I can assure you that nothing that you are going through and nothing that you have ever been through would be at the level of the natural conflicts that existed in the early church among Jewish believers in Palestine.

Think about it for a moment. You had people who were zealots. Jews committed to the overthrow of the Roman government by violent means who hated the government. They were getting saved and they were going to church with people who were collaborating with the Roman government, collecting taxes for them and supporting them in disputes against zealots. Maybe they were folks who helped arrest some of the zealot party.

The pressure of Roman occupation and Roman oppression, the political situation was so volatile that nothing that you have ever gone through, I don't care how bad your church past was, rises to the level of what James was attempting to handle in those early Jewish churches.

Let me lay out a fundamental principle about handling conflict wisely before we look at today's text. The fundamental principle that I want to begin with today is that the issue for a church and a group in the church, for a ministry in the church, for a family, between roommates, the issue is not whether we disagree, we will disagree in our families and in our ministries and our groups; we will disagree at a church-wide level; the issue is never whether we disagree, but biblically the issue is how we disagree. Jesus assumes that there will be disagreements. That is why he lays down a process for handling disagreements and conflicts in Matthew 18. What Jesus does is he outlines a very simple, practical approach to dealing with disagreements and dealing with times when people sin against us.

The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians, was not upset that the Corinthians had conflicts. What he was upset with was the way they were going about handling their conflicts. They were forming parties and divisions. They were taking each other to court, using secular means to deal with disputes between Christians. That is why he responded, "Surely there is someone in your midst wise enough to handle this." Surely, there must be a wise owl somewhere.

Because we are different, we are going to disagree. A hand and a foot are going to disagree about walking onto hot beach sand. The fact is, friends, that conflict in the church's history has often been used by God to produce greater revelation. Often, conflict is a way that the mind of God is revealed. As people in godly ways say, "Well, we have a disagreement here. What can God be saying to us? What does God say about how we ought to discipline our children? Or spend money? Or this group's direction? Or our choice of music? Or? Or? Or?"

You look at the history of the church and conflict has often been used by God to give revelation. That is how all the early creeds were hammered out. The Nicene Creed, the Apostle's Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed, were all hammered out in the midst of great conflict. The conflict in the early church in Acts 15 resulted in the church expanding their perspective on the scope of salvation and recognizing and giving its stamp of approval to salvation going to the Gentiles.

The primary issue, you can write this down, is not whether we have conflicts, but how we handle them. Will we handle them in a God-glorifying way? Will we handle them in a wise way?

Boy, when you are in the midst of conflict, what you really need is wisdom. Is that not the case? How am I going to deal with this?

James starts off with this statement: Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

In this section James starts off with a question: Who is wise and understanding among you? It is interesting that James uses the word "understanding". The word literally means something like "well informed," a person who has a lot of information at their fingertips. The person who has a mass of stored up knowledge.

You say, "We have a conflict. We want to hear from the wise old owl." It is interesting that James doesn't start off by suggesting to us that we necessarily go to the person who is the smartest person. But he points to certain qualities: a good life, deeds done in humility.

The whole backdrop of James' understanding of wisdom and you being able to handle conflicts wisely is to understand how wisdom is portrayed in the Bible. James is a man who is rooted in the Old Testament scriptures. Wisdom, according to the Old Testament and especially in Proverbs, starts with a relationship with God. The beginning of wisdom, the book of Proverbs says, is the fear of the Lord. Proverbs, of course, is not suggesting to us that a wise person is the one watches their steps because they know that Big Brother in the sky is going to come down on them with a hammer. A wise person is someone who has a deep knowledge of God, not just cerebral, not just information. Wisdom in the Bible is not just someone who can spit out correct answers. It has to do with an intimacy that springs from personal relationship.

Friends, there is a reason why the Bible uses the word "know" as a metaphor, a euphemism, for sexual relationships. Adam knew his wife. It had nothing to do with the fact that the Bible is embarrassed about sex and chose to cover it up with a code word "knew" or "to know." It is, rather, that in the Bible knowledge always involves personal relationship and personal intimacy.

Here is what I am saying: a wise person is a person who values relationship. It is not just a computer and information storehouse. But always where there is a conflict, they are a person who says: I care about the relationships here. I understand that truth is in a person and that the center of the universe is relational, so for me to give a wise solution to a conflict is always going to involve trying to preserve people's relationships with each other.

A wise person is always going to be a good person. Again, not just knowledgeable. James says, "Let him show it by his good life." You want to receive counsel about a conflict, you go to someone who is living a good life, who is modeling peaceful relationships with their family, their children, their co-workers.

But the characteristic that I appreciate the most here is the characteristic of meekness or humility as it is translated in the New International Version. It is better-translated meekness. It says: Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life and deeds done in the humility, literally in the meekness that comes from wisdom.

A wise person is a relational person. A wise person is a good person. But ultimately, what James is getting at is that a wise person is a meek person.

When we are in a conflict we know that the best advice that we are going to hear from the world is about self-assertion. It is about aggressiveness. About not letting anyone push you around. That the person who succeeds is the pushy person, the person who can command attention, organize vast sums of money and resources, the go-getter, the hard-charger. We come upon a passage like this that says that in the midst of conflict one of the qualities that is most needed that is most neglected, is meekness, humility.

Let me share with you what meekness is not. Meekness, in the midst of conflict, is not natural. It is not something that some people are born with. It is not being an easy-going person. The person with whom folks just naturally get along with. You are like a golden retriever. You have a nice disposition. James is commending the quality of meekness to all who are involved in a conflict: the leaders, the people under them, everyone is to show this quality of meekness. Therefore, it couldn't possibly be a natural quality because some of us are not naturally cuddly. We are not all born golden retrievers.

You see that there are very different temperaments of people in the Bible, all of whom were through God's help, able to take on this quality of meekness. Moses was a fiery man. He killed someone in anger when he was young. He understood the way of strength and conquest, assertiveness, pushiness. He was raised among the Egyptians in Pharaoh's court. But later in his life the Bible tells us that Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth. God had done something in him. Meekness is not a natural quality.

David was a warrior. He killed Goliath and slaughtered hundreds and thousands of people in battle. He showed this quality of meekness.

And you see it in Paul who was, again, a fiery person. Radical. Argumentative. He had this brilliant mind and could slice people apart with arguments. God taught him this quality of meekness. Meekness is not natural.

Meekness is not weakness. That should be evident from the people I just mentioned. But literally, this word "meek" that James uses is spoken of in describing horses that had been broken and bridled, tamed. Powerful animals,

strong animals, but that had been tamed. We are talking about strength under control. Strength that has been subdued. Not Wally Cox, Mr. Milk Toast. It is not natural and it is not weak.

What you see most of all about meekness is that it is not self-protective. A person who is meek is a person who does not walk around focused on themselves. They are not always watching out to make sure that someone is not talking about them. They don't care about what other people are saying. They don't engage in self-pity. They don't sit there and say, "People just don't understand me. I am so wonderful and I have been so badly hurt and badly treated."

A meek person is a person who sees themselves before God as sinners, deserving nothing, but because of the grace of God, absolutely beloved of God. Precious to God and someone who God will protect and who God will defend. There is no self-protection, no worry in the heart of a meek person. They are fully confident in God's overriding control. They can give up being self-assertive because they really believe that vengeance is the Lord's and he will repay. That we can trust ourselves to a faithful creator.

Now James wants us to understand the ungodly way, unholy ways that we handle conflicts and what serves as a cheap substitute for wisdom. He is then going to commend for us the real thing.

What is a cheap substitute for wisdom? Verses 14 and 15: But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such wisdom does not come from heaven, but it is earthly, unspiritual and of the devil. James doesn't mince words. Have you noticed that? For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

James tells us that even in the church, the way that people handle their conflicts can be earthly, unspiritual and of the devil. He is actually going into a descending order of wickedness. The first word, "earthly" means having the thoughts of this world. Looking at things purely naturally, which immediately brings up for James being devoid of the Holy Spirit. When you are in the thick of a conflict, very often there is not reference to God in people's thoughts. What would glorify God is not being asked. What is God's will? Would we say this if Jesus were in the room? What does God want to bring about? There is a void when it comes to the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, as we learned last week, the whole thing can be inspired by the devil. James calls it demonic.

Much counsel that you receive in the midst of a conflict can be demonic. No reference to God. I don't mean the word "God" is not used, I mean that the mind of God is not consulted.

You say, "How can I tell what the origin of counsel is in the midst of conflict? How can I tell what the origin is of my planned response to the conflict?"

James says, "Well, you are going to see certain manifestations. We never know when we are simply dealing in the spiritual realm of what we are dealing with. We can never be sure if it remains in the spiritual realm, in the heavens, what is inspiring certain kinds of behavior in this man or that woman. But when we see these behaviors manifest, then we can tell."

There are certain things that God never inspires. When we see these behaviors we know that behind it is not God. There are certain things that are always inspired demonically. They are always unspiritual behaviors. James doesn't leave us in the ozone. He says, "If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't boast about it or deny the truth."

There are two marks of demonic inspiration for handling a conflict: bitter envy and selfish ambition. The first characteristic, bitter envy, should be translated bitter zeal. The Greek word is zealous. Zeal is not necessarily negative. The Bible tells us that it is appropriate to be zealous as long as we are zealous for the right things. It is good to be passionate. We live in a day when people are apathetic and cynical. When no one gives a rip anymore. They can hardly motivate themselves to vote or to care about the issues. Oh let's all go home and cocoon in our houses and pop in a video.

We ought to be zealous for Jesus. Passionate to see family members saved. On fire for the spread of the kingdom of God. Radical in our desire to get rid of sin in our own lives. Zeal is not necessarily bad.

But you know, in the midst of a conflict, if someone is super-heated and super-charged and it is not about saving souls, or talking about the gospel or talking about getting rid of sin in our own lives, when someone is super-heated and super-charged about an issue in a group, when they are dialed up to level 10 and they can't settle down, that inspiration is not from God. When a person is furious, blind with passion for their position, approaches things with a "let's not take any hostages alive"—that is what James is talking about when he speaks of bitter zeal.

Often it will be masked in a pursuit of the truth. If you have ever seen someone who was super-charged, geared-up, you can bet that that fury is probably not being fueled by the Lord. Again, I am saying apart from, apart from zeal for the gospel, zeal for salvations, zeal regarding radical abuse.

The second thing that James points to is selfish ambition. Let me speak to you as a veteran of church wars, conflict. I have been in church in a devoted and radical way for 23 years. I have been the source of problems. I have been the object of attacks. And I have gotten to mediate a fair share of conflicts. One of the things that you frequently see at the base of ungodly conflicts is selfish ambition.

Last week I talked about godly ambition. A passion to be used by God, a desire to make your life count for something. It is entirely right and appropriate for you to in your prayers in the morning say to God, "God, use me today as an instrument of your kingdom. Make me a bearer of your peace. Use my mouth to encourage people and to not tear them down. Allow me, God, the opportunity to share your gospel. Empower me, Lord, to heal the sick. Guide me, Lord, into the things that would most glorify you." It is right and good and noble to be ambitious to be used by God.

But then there is selfish ambition that is at the heart and root of much ungodly and unwise handling of conflict. What does James mean by selfish ambition? Let me give you four questions that you can ask yourself to see whether what is bothering you is the result of selfish ambition or godly ambition.

The first question you might ask yourself is: Are you willing to play your position? Are you willing to play your position? I don't know how many of you

watch professional basketball, but probably the best known sports figure in the world right now is Michael Jordan. His team is probably the best-known team in pro basketball, the Chicago Bulls, because of Jordan. For that team to succeed, people need to play their positions. They need to know what their roles are. If everyone on the team tried to be Michael Jordan, the guy who takes the shots in clutch situations, the guy who is basically going to be the dominant force offensively—if everyone tried to be Michael Jordan, there would be no team. Even Scottie Pippin, who is a great player in his own right, has to subordinate himself if the Chicago Bulls are going to play together. Someone has to see that his or her role is to rebound the ball. Someone else has to see that his or her role is to pass to Jordan. Some people have to play mainly defensive roles.

What I see happen in a lot of church conflicts and group conflicts is folks become unwilling to play their positions. There are some people who simply cannot lead. They must lead. They can't play second fiddle. They can't come under. They can't support someone else's star. Their ideas have to win the day. Their positions need to be heard.

Friends, that is not godly ambition. It doesn't matter how smart and gifted you are, you will never find true success in the kingdom unless you can carry someone else's bag for a long, long while. If you can't be a bit player, God is not going to entrust you with true riches. Can you play your position? Wives, can you submit to your husband's leadership? Husbands, can you initiate spiritually?

The second question to ask yourself about your ambition: Do you support the whole?

Do you know where a lot of conflicts arise from? People who love their part of the kingdom of God more than they love the whole kingdom. People who love their ministry in the church more than they love the whole church.

Do you know that God loves his whole kingdom? God loves the whole church and not just your part of it. I have seen a lot of ungodly conflict arising from people who were passionate about their areas of ministry, but began to believe that their areas of ministry were the whole thing, the whole kingdom, as if the whole body was suddenly reduced to the eye or the ear.

Years ago I had to speak to a group, I will get personal here, who were involved in our pro-life ministry. They wanted to drive that thing to the point of essentially reducing the church's ministry down to a pro-life ministry. They would constantly approach me: Why are you not making more pro-life statements? Why are we not requiring the church to march? And requiring the church to take certain positions.

I spoke with them and said, "You have heard me speak from the pulpit, teach about the abortion issue. You know that I believe that the Bible is pro-life. You know that the church and I have supported pro-life ministries for years. But the church is bigger than this. The church is also called in the Bible to worship God, so we are going to have a worship ministry. To evangelize the lost, so we are going to have an evangelism ministry. To train up children, so we are going to have a children's ministry. To feed the hungry and so we are going to have a ministry to the poor. And on and on and on.

I am so glad that what I have seen in the church for the last half dozen or so years is a different spirit. Those who are laboring in the pro-life ministry also display a love for the whole church. They speak well of the whole.

The same thing can be true if you are passionate about world missions or children, renewal or healing. Do you love the whole or do you just love your part of the whole?

A third question you can ask yourself regarding selfish ambition is are you concerned about roles? Some of the conflicts that we have gotten into, and I am being very personal here today, but some of the major conflicts we have gotten into have been when someone has been denied a role or had their role changed. They were asked to step down or to make room for another person who was more gifted or different than they were. Do you know the way we relate to roles can tell a lot about whether it is godly ambition driving us or selfish ambition? Godly ambition says that nobody can keep me from serving God in an area where I want to serve God. If you cannot be the Sunday School Coordinator here, are you saying that you can't minister to children? No one can humanly keep you from doing ministry.

We have a couple here in the church who don't have any of their own children, but every week take in a dozen plus kids from the neighborhood and lead them to Christ and disciple them. They have been doing this for years. Nobody can keep them from it.

If you don't get to coordinate the ministry to the poor, you don't get a salary there, are you saying that anyone in the world can keep you from ministering to the poor?

No one can stop you from worshiping God with a few people even if you are not the worship leader.

A couple of things to check for in checking out the origin of conflict: is the person super-heated and super-charged? That may be bitter zeal. Is the person filled with selfish ambition? Can't play their position? Can't submit? Focus on roles or their part of the whole? James says that all of this results in disorder and every evil practice. The word disorder means restlessness, instability. What you are going to see in a person who is handling conflict in an ungodly way is restlessness. The Bible describes people in sin as being restless, being unhappy, being tossed about like a wave.

Isaiah 57:19 says, *"Peace, peace says the Lord. Peace to them that are far off and peace to them that are near."* But the prophet Isaiah goes on to say, "but the wicked are like the troubled sea which cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt."

That is what James is talking about here, being like the troubled sea. Always in motion, always in flux, always restless and unstable, constantly in motion and pushing up dirt and mire from the bottom. He says that you are going to see disorder and every vile practice.

One of the things that you are going to see in a person who is being energized not from God is an instability and waffling, an inconsistency. They say one thing to one person and another thing to someone else and a third thing to a third person. There is this waffling.

Let me mention a few examples:

Triangling. That is what family therapists call it. Person A has a problem with Person B. Person A doesn't talk with Person B. Person A talks to Person C, who listens to Person A, gives comfort to him. Person A feels relieved. Person C, now of course, is upset and involved in a conflict not their own.

Triangling. Instead of speaking directly to the person and being fierce about it - spouses drag their kids into their disputes; Mom counsels with one kid, Dad with another - we are going to get together again and not drag in everyone else. Triangling is a vile practice.

The second unspiritual approach to handling conflict is over spiritualizing. We wouldn't even be having this conflict if we would just worship together. I feel like if we would worship and pray together more then all of this conflict would go away. Maybe. Maybe your group or family doesn't pray enough together. Maybe they don't worship together. And maybe that is at the heart of why you conflict so much because you aren't inviting the presence of the Lord into your marriage or into your ministry or small group. Maybe that is the problem. But maybe it is not. Sometimes real issues need to be discussed. Sometimes real sin needs to be confessed and owned. The Bible never tells us to worship as a substitute for the confession of sin. Or to pray as a substitute for the acknowledgment of real wrongdoing. Spiritualizing can be a cheap substitute for the wise handling of conflict.

James concludes with a very different kind of wisdom, a true wisdom. In verse 17 he says, *"But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness."*

James concludes in talking with us about the need for wisdom in handling conflicts. He focuses on the source of that wisdom and that is it comes from above. But the wisdom that comes from above, from heaven, from God. Here is the idea. You are in the middle of a conflict that is going badly. You are saying to yourself, "I can't handle this. This is too much for me. I can't see my way through this. Things are unraveling. We don't seem to be getting anywhere. I have not a clue as to how to untie these knots."

Rather than becoming hopeless in that situation, might I suggest to you that you are exactly in the right place? The wisdom that is needed for sorting through something important, that is big, does not come from you. You shouldn't have answers. It is appropriate for you to feel completely empty, completely at a loss, utterly at the end of your rope. You don't just look at these seven qualities that are needed to heal conflict: being pure, peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy, and so on and say, "okay, I think I will take those things up. Yeah, I can do that." The only person in whom these qualities can be placed is a person who goes before the Lord and is utterly empty and desperate.

You say you have no answers. You are spent. You feel like giving up. The Bible says good. That is the starting point for handling a conflict wisely because that is the point that you cry out to God for wisdom from above. It is when you are poor in spirit, when you look over the qualities and character traits that are needed to deal with conflict in a godly way and say, "I don't have any of them" that the Lord says, "Great, now I can do something in this situation and get glory for myself." The wisdom that is needed for conflict is from above. It is from God. It is not from our natural intelligence, from our storehouse of information, from our strategizing.

James mentions seven qualities that are found when God is inspiring solutions and answers. What God does is that he doesn't simply give information, but he makes us into different people. The mark of Jesus is not a

new answer, it is a new man. It is not a new solution, it is a new creation. Do you understand that what God is trying to do in allowing a conflict to take place in your life is he is trying to change you? He is forcing you to recognize your limits. Remember what we learned about trials and God putting us on a wheel and slapping us around like clay? We say, "Does it have to hurt so much?" Yes, it gets pretty rough and it is one of the primary ways God changes you.

James mentions seven qualities in the Bible world. The number seven is always the number of perfection. I believe he is talking about the seven-fold expression of the Holy Spirit. You might want to compare this list to Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 or Isaiah's list of the seven-fold Spirit in Isaiah 11. Here is what you need in the midst of a conflict. You don't need an answer. You need to become different people.

So James says: "The wisdom that comes from above is first of all pure." Here you are. You are fighting with your spouse or your kids. You are wrestling with another person in the church and cry out to God, "Make me pure." Literally, make me holy. Don't just give me an answer, change me. A person who wants to be pure is a person who desires to be free from every sin that they are aware of because sins separates us from God. We desire to be right with God.

The bottom line of a lot of conflict is that it is possible that we are not right with God. Because we are not right with God, things have gone wrong in our relationships. Lord, make me free from every sin that I am aware of. It may not have anything to do with this situation, but I want to get right with you. I don't want to just be free in the sense of just being forgiven, but Lord, I also want to be free from the power of sins over my life. I see that I have been under the control of Satan in an area in my life. There has been an influence in my life that is not you. I have been blinded to the truth of certain things. The God of this world has blinded me. I wanted to get out from under this power. I want to get out from the tyranny of sin. I want to be pure.

Lord, make me a peaceable person. When I think about being a peaceable person, I think about setting me free from the desire to retaliate. Set me free from the desire, God, not just the activity. That is not enough. But the desire to retaliate. There's so much anger in my heart, God. Make me a person who doesn't always have to get back at people through talking about them. Through harsh critiques of them. A peaceable person is a person who is peaceful inside. They are not unstable and blown about by the wind like that tossed wave of the sea. Rather, they are satisfied with God. Their roots go down far enough in God that they are not constantly buffeted. They know that God will protect them. They know that. That God will only allow what he wants to allow and always for our good. And so they don't have to strike out in vengeance or protect their backs.

Such a person is also gentle. Lord, eliminate from my life harshness. Lord, take off my edge. I don't want to become old and still be so mean. See, you can use this list as a prayer list when you are in conflict. Write these things down or read them from the Bible and then turn them into prayer. Meditate on this. If husbands and wives would take this list and meditate on it and pray for these qualities in themselves, we would have virtually no divorces. If roommates and groups would pray over these things, there would be fewer divisions. Lord,

make me gentle. Take away from me my harshness, my sarcasm, my biting tongue, my argumentativeness, my vindictiveness.

Friends, I will tell you that gentleness is a quality that we see in God, as we do all of these things because they are all from the Holy Spirit. Gentleness is not the absence of strength. Gentleness is someone who is strong and secure. Jesus was gentle. He was gentle of heart.

One of my favorite passages in Isaiah says, "See the Sovereign Lord comes to rule with power. His arm rules for him. His reward is with him and his recompense accompanies him." It talks about the power of the Lord and his determination to judge and to reward. The very next verse, after speaking of the power of the Lord, says, "He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart. He gently leads those who have young."

Gentle strength. I believe the only person that really can be gentle is a strong person, someone who is secure, who doesn't have to protect.

James goes on and says that a wise person is also going to be submissive. Literally, open to reason. Lord, make me open to reason. In other words, Lord, make me teachable. Help me to see that my view is not the only view. That my rights are not the only rights at stake. That my thoughts are not the only thoughts. My perspectives are not the only perspectives. Allow people to get through to me.

You see this with Jesus. He was so teachable at the hands of God the Father. He allowed himself to be led and to be directed. He humbled himself to learn what God wanted to teach him. A teachable person is ready to learn especially when you can get through to them. They aren't stuck in their viewpoints.

James says that we are to be submissive and full of mercy. The question is what do you do to someone or with someone who has hurt you when you have power, when they are in your power? Do you crush them? Or do you show them mercy?

You know, when God has us in his hand and we have offended him, he devises ways to let us go. He doesn't squish us like a bug. Lord, make me full of mercy.

Last of all James says that impartial and sincere, literally without uncertainty or insincerity. The word means to be single. Tie the various threads of my heart together, God, to want to serve you above everything else. Make me single. Unite my heart.

When you are in the midst of a conflict, you really will feel inside of you Romans 7 that divided heart. Oh Lord, I want to handle this well, but I also want to squish this person. I want to lash out. I want to retaliate. These last qualities that James is commending to us are the qualities of having a united heart, where your heart is not filled with darkness and light, anger and mercy. Make me sincere. Make me whole. Make me free from hypocrisy.

James concludes that when these qualities are present, peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. You can be a true peacemaker. I hope you haven't heard today weakness as a definition of peacemaking. I hope you haven't heard me exhort you to confess sins that you haven't committed. Some people are like that. They take responsibility for what

is not their fault. If you live with an alcoholic long enough, they will try to persuade you to take responsibility for their drinking. You are the reason I drink. And in the body of Christ, there are people who function like alcoholics. They blame you for their sins. Your leadership is the reason I had to gossip about you. You make me do the harmful things that I do. You are the reason for my hate campaign. I hope you haven't heard me say today that you need to confess sins that you have never committed.

I hope you didn't hear me say today that you need to be a person who opts for peace at any price. That you are just to give ground and appease and make nice.

No. Here is what you should have heard. In the midst of conflict you need wisdom from above. And that wisdom is going to primarily show you that God has allowed this conflict to mature you. It is to put in you qualities that you desperately lack: maturity, gentleness, and peacefulness. God wants to bring you to the end of your rope. He wants to get you past self-protectiveness and hanging on to your rights. He is interested in changing you.

You say, "Rich, you didn't spend a lot of time talking about the process, the process of talking with another person. You have talked mainly about personal qualities. God changing us."

You are right. Because I think that is the most difficult lesson. The simple thing is to follow a process. It takes no great spirituality to talk to a person who has offended you. All you need to do is obey the scripture. You go to people and talk to them rather than about them.

You hear them. Hear their hurts. You acknowledge their feelings.

No, that is not wisdom from above that is not high-level spirituality. What is high-level spirituality and what is wisdom in a conflict is allowing God to change you so that you become the person that God intends you to be. And if you allow that, and the other person allows it, there is going to be peace in the animal kingdom.

Let's pray.