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RESOLVING CONFLICTS GOD'S WAY

James 4:7-10

By

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August 28, 2005
(Happy Birthday to my wonderful wife!)

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James Lesson 16

Resolving Conflicts God's Way James 4:7-10

A dour Englishman was seated on a train between two ladies arguing about the window. One claimed that she would die of heat-stroke if it stayed closed. The other said she would expire of pneumonia if it was opened. The ladies called the conductor, who didn't know how to resolve the conflict. Finally, the gentleman spoke up. "First, open the window. That will kill the one. Then close it. That will kill the other. Then we will have peace."

As I said last week, the world has many ways to resolve conflict, but invariably, they leave God out. God tells us that His ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8). His ways are much higher than our ways, and often run counter to our ways. If we want true and lasting peace in our relationships, then we need to resolve conflicts God's way. His way for resolving conflicts is not to give us surface techniques that achieve outward peace. Rather, God goes for the heart—primarily our heart relationship with Him. When our ways please Him, then we have a foundation for resolving conflicts with others (Prov. 16:7).

In James 4:1, he asks, "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?" He goes on to show that the source is selfishness. In a section running through verse 12, he shows,

To resolve conflicts, repent of your sinful selfishness and humble yourself before God.

1. To resolve conflicts, judge your selfish motives (4:1-3).
2. To resolve conflicts, turn from all spiritual adultery and humbly entreat God's grace (4:4-6).
3. To resolve conflicts, submit to God, resist the devil, and repent of all sin (4:7-10).
4. To resolve conflicts, stop judging others and submit to God's Word (4:11-12).

Today we come to the third section, where James says...

To resolve conflicts, submit to God, resist the devil,
and repent of all sin.

Our text is sandwiched between the quote from Proverbs 3:34, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (in 4:6) and the concluding command, "Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you" (4:10). Keep in mind that the overall context is about resolving conflicts in the church (or home). Here James zeroes in on God's way of conflict resolution, which deals with our hearts before Him. Conflict with God is often behind conflicts with others. First and foremost in any conflict, we must get right with God.

1. To resolve conflicts, submit to God (4:7, 8, 10).

We can sum up three of James' commands under this one head: Submit to God unconditionally (4:7); draw near to God (4:8); and, humble yourself before God (4:10).

A. Submit to God unconditionally (4:7).

You can go to seminars on how to be more assertive, but I've yet to see a seminar on how to learn to submit! It's not a popular concept, but it is a biblical one. The word means "to put yourself in rank under" someone, implying a hierarchy of authority. It is used of the obligation to submit to government authorities (Rom. 13:1, 5; 1 Pet. 2:13); to elders in the church (1 Pet. 5:5); of mutual submission of husbands and wives to one another, and of wives to husbands, in marriage (Eph. 5:21, 22; 1 Pet. 3:1, 5); and of slaves to masters (1 Pet. 2:18).

Of course, God is the ultimate and only sovereign authority in the universe, and it should be obvious to everyone that it is most unwise to rebel against His authority. Since He is "opposed to the proud" (James 4:6), verse 7 infers, "Submit *therefore* to God." It is the only sensible thing to do!

But because of the fall, as Paul explains (Rom. 8:7), the mind set on the flesh "is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so." (*Subject* is the same Greek word as *submit* in James 4:7.) Unbelievers are unable to submit to God's law, because they are unwilling to do so. Using the same word in Romans 10:3, Paul asserts, "For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God." In pride, fallen man wants to set up his own righteousness as good enough,

but it falls far short of God's absolute righteousness. So the essence of human rebellion against God is that we do not submit to His holy law or to His perfect righteousness. You cannot separate submitting to God from trusting Him for salvation.

While much more could be said, here are four ways that we tend to resist God and thus need to focus on submitting to Him:

(1) Submit unconditionally to God's way of salvation.

All of the world's religions, except for biblical Christianity, teach that salvation is a matter of human endeavor and goodness. The world's way is, "Work hard, be the best person you can be, and you'll go to heaven." Such teaching feeds human pride. It gives the good person reason to boast.

God's way of salvation is totally opposed to man's way. God's way allows no one to boast before Him. He declares that we all have sinned and deserve His judgment. Further, because of our sin and pride, we aren't willing to come to Him for salvation. All of our good works would never qualify us for heaven, because they cannot pay the debt of sin that we owe.

But what we could never do, God in His mercy did. He sent His own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He satisfied God's justice by dying in the place of sinners. God offers His salvation as a free gift, received by faith alone, apart from any human works or goodness (see Eph. 2:1-9). To be saved, we must submit unconditionally to God's way of salvation.

(2) Submit unconditionally to God's person.

We all tend to submit to the part of God's person that we naturally like, but we either ignore or deliberately dodge the part of His person that we don't care for. Nobody has a problem with God's great love, but many have a problem with His hatred of all sin and His absolute justice that demands that all unrepentant sinners be punished for eternity in hell. But if God's Word reveals that sinners will be punished eternally in hell, and if Jesus Himself taught it (and, He did, Matt. 25:46), then we dare not fight it or reject it, even if it is not to our liking! We must submit to all of who God is as revealed in His Word.

(3) Submit unconditionally to God's Word.

Let's be honest: There are some difficult things in the Bible that, if we had the choice, we would cut out of it. In fact, Thomas Jefferson, who was not a believer, literally took scissors and cut out the parts of the Bible that he did not like! While none of us would be so brazen, in effect we often do just as Jefferson did. We don't literally cut out the difficult parts, but we just ignore them or don't work at understanding and submitting to those parts!

I know Christians who don't like the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty in choosing some, but not all, for salvation. So they just skip passages like Romans 9, which God inspired Paul to write for our spiritual edification. Of course, they must also skip many other texts, since the doctrine of God's sovereign election is all through the Bible. Or, they explain it away by saying that God foreknew who would choose Him, so He chose them. They never pause to reflect that such a view turns the Bible on its head and makes sinful men sovereign, rather than God!

I once talked with a Jehovah's Witness woman who came to my door. I found out that she formerly had been a Lutheran. When I asked her why she left the Lutheran faith, she said that she couldn't understand the trinity. But the issue with the trinity is not whether you understand it, but rather, is it clearly taught in Scripture? If it is, you must submit to it.

In Spurgeon's day, there were many liberal critics attacking the truthfulness and authority of the Bible. He saw that behind such attacks was the hostility of the unregenerate mind. He said, "The only real argument against the Bible is an unholy life. When a man argues against the Word of God, follow him home and see if you can discover the reason of his enmity to the Word of the Lord. It lies in some form of sin" (in Iain Murray, *Spurgeon and Hyper-Calvinism* [Banner of Truth], p. 8).

(4) Submit unconditionally to God's providential dealings with you.

God does many things in our lives that are not especially pleasant or to our liking. There are many such trials that we will never in this life fully understand God's reason for them. It may be the untimely death of a loved one. It could be unfair treatment at work or at school. Perhaps you had abusive parents or were the

object of racial discrimination. You may suffer from some terrible disease or deformity. In the context of James 4, it may be a difficult person in your life who is always trying to stir up conflict. The potential list is endless, but you can't read the daily news without realizing that life is terribly unfair, from the human point of view.

Yet the Bible is clear that nothing happens to us apart from God's providential permission or care. If Satan attacks the godly Job, killing all of his children and taking away his possessions and health, it is only because God permitted Satan to do it. God has all of our days pre-numbered (Ps. 139:16) and He even has all the hairs on our heads numbered (Matt. 10:30). If He allows James to be beheaded, but Peter to escape, that's God's prerogative (Acts 12). If Peter later dies a martyr's death, but John lives to a ripe old age, that's God's business (John 21:21-23).

You can fight against God for the difficult things that happen, or you can humble yourself under His mighty hand, casting all your anxiety upon Him (1 Pet. 5:6-7). "Submit therefore to God" in His way of salvation, in His person, in His Word, and in His providential dealings with you. There's a second aspect of submission:

B. Draw near to God (4:8).

James gives a command and a promise: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." Before I comment on what this means, let me clarify what it does *not* mean. It does *not* mean that God is waiting for sinners to make the first move toward Him, and then He will respond. Not only does that run counter to all of Scripture, it also runs counter to this verse, which is *God commanding us* to draw near to Him!

Jesus said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44). In case we missed it, He repeated, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father" (John 6:65). God *always* makes the first move toward us. If He did not, we all would perish in our sins (see also, John 8:34, 43-44; Rom. 3:10-12). So if you have drawn near to God for salvation, it was because God chose you and drew you to Himself. As Jesus said, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me" (John 6:37).

But these words in James are written primarily to believers. It is easy even for believers to drift away from the Lord. James' point is, "Guess who moved?" It wasn't God! If you're engaging in continuing quarrels and conflicts, you are *not* close to God. You've drifted. He is calling you to draw near to Him, with the promise that He is ready and waiting to draw near to you. The thought of not enjoying sweet fellowship with our loving Lord should move you to clear up whatever stands between you and Him.

You cannot be close to God at the same time that you're angry or bitter toward someone else. That's why immediately after teaching how serious the sin of anger is, Jesus said (Matt. 5:23-24), "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." You can't draw near to God until you first clear up, as much as it is in your power, any relational difficulties. If you think that you're close to God, but you're angry and bitter, you're deceiving yourself! Submit to God; draw near to God.

C. Humble yourself before God (4:10).

Pride is at the heart of all disobedience to God and of almost all relational conflicts. If God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6), then you want to make sure you're not making yourself God's opponent! The theme of God humbling the proud, but exalting the humble, runs throughout Scripture (1 Sam. 2:4-8; Job 42:6, 10-17; Ps. 34:18; 51:17; Prov. 3:34; 29:25; Isa. 57:15; 66:2; Ezek. 17:24; Matt. 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14; 1 Pet. 5:6). In the context of dealing with relational conflicts, the apostle Paul tells us to imitate the Lord Jesus, the supreme example of one who humbled Himself and was exalted by God (Phil. 2:8-9).

The key to developing biblical humility is in the phrase, "in the presence of the Lord" (James 4:10). Only those with hardened hearts could be proud in the presence of the Lord! The holy angels in His presence cover their faces (Isa. 6:2). When Isaiah had his vision of the Lord, he was undone—personally shattered—and immediately aware of his own sinfulness (Isa. 6:5). When God portrayed the wonders of creation before Job, he had no further arguments against God. Instead, he said (Job 42:6), "I retract, and I

repent in dust and ashes." When the apostle John, who formerly had rested his head on Jesus' chest, saw Him in His glory on the Isle of Patmos, he fell at His feet as a dead man (Rev. 1:17).

This is one reason Calvin's *Institutes* are so spiritually rich—he is always lifting up God's majesty and showing how man's only proper place before Him is to lie prostrate in awe. The Puritan Thomas Manton paraphrases Calvin's opening line from *The Institutes*: "The soul becomes humble by the true knowledge of God and ourselves" (*Exposition of the Epistle of James* [Sovereign Grace Book Club], p. 348; I updated his English). He continues (*ibid.*), "The stars vanish when the sun arises; and our poor candle is slighted into a disappearance, when the glory of God arises in our thoughts.... And we see our vileness in God's majesty.... Get as large and comprehensive thoughts of him as you can; see his glory, if you would know your own baseness." The first step in resolving relational conflicts is to submit to God, which includes drawing near to Him and humbling yourself before Him.

2. To resolve conflicts, resist the devil (4:7).

The liberal German scholar, Rudolph Bultmann, wrote, "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless, and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits" (in *Kerygma and Myth*, pp. 4-5, cited by John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* [IVP], p. 231). Take your pick: either Bultmann is right, or Jesus and the New Testament writers are right!

While often Satan does not need to involve himself or his demonic forces in our conflicts (our flesh incites them without any extra help!), there are times when demons are directly involved in disrupting our relationships. While it would be out of line to see a demon behind every quarrel, it is also out of line and naïve to think that demons are never involved.

One author has gained a lot of popularity writing several books outlining numerous steps to overcome Satan's power in your life (Neil Anderson, *The Bondage Breaker* [Harvest House], *Victory Over the Darkness* [Regal Books]). The Bible is a bit more simple—one step: "Resist the devil and he will flee from you." We get our word *antihistamine* from the Greek word translated *resist*. It means to

stand against or oppose. Paul uses it with reference to spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6:13, "Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to *resist* in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm."

The Greek word for devil is *diabolos*, which means, literally, to throw against. It is the word for slanderer. It translates the Hebrew word for Satan, which means "adversary." The devil is an evil fallen angel who stands against God and His people, always ready to accuse or slander them (Zech. 3:1, 2; Rev. 12:10). While we are no match for him in our own strength, in the name of the Lord and protected by the armor He provides, we may simply stand against Satan and he will flee. To resolve conflicts, first submit to God. Then, stop and pray in Jesus' name against the prince of darkness.

3. To resolve conflicts, repent of all sin (4:8, 9).

James sounds like an Old Testament prophet as he proclaims, "Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom." He is talking about thorough, heartfelt repentance.

Those whom James confronted had laughter and at least superficial joy. If you had seen them, they would have seemed quite happy. But, as we saw last week, they had become friends with the world. At the heart of worldliness is finding joy and pleasure in things other than God, or while disregarding and disobeying God.

There are people in evangelical churches who are outwardly happy in their positions of power in the church; happy with their abundant material possessions, and happy with their self-centered lifestyles. Yet at the same time, they hate others in the church, ignore the needy, and never give sacrificially to the Lord's work. It is to these types that James shouts, "Be miserable and mourn and weep!"

James' words show that there is an emotional element to genuine repentance. It is not just a glib, "I'm sorry that I offended you." Or, "I'm sorry that you're upset" (implying, "it's your fault!"). When you are truly repentant, you accept full responsibility for your sin. You don't excuse it as a shortcoming or oversight. You

mourn over how you have offended God, disgraced His name, and hurt your brother or sister in Christ (2 Cor. 2:1-7; 7:7-11).

Psalms 34:18 promises, "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." In Psalm 51:17, where David laments his sin with Bathsheba, he writes, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." John Bunyan wrote a beautiful short book on that verse, *The Acceptable Sacrifice* [Banner of Truth], in which he explains how to know if your heart is broken before God, and how to keep it tender. (I have put a few quotes from it in today's bulletin and on the church web site under "Helpful Resources.")

The mourning of biblical repentance is not opposed to the biblical joy that we are commanded to have at all times (Phil. 4:4; 1 Thess. 5:16). In fact, true joy comes only through true repentance, because it is then that we experience God's forgiveness and mercy. The woman who wet Jesus' feet with her tears knew the joy of sins forgiven. The proud Pharisee, who did not see his own need for forgiveness, had neither her tears nor her joy (Luke 7:36-50).

Conclusion

Kent Hughes (*James: Faith that Works* [Crossway Books], p. 189) tells of an old preacher who was told that in one of his sermons a certain woman had gotten "joy in the Lord" (conversion). His penetrating question was, "Did she ever get any sorrow?" He knew that to truly experience the joy of sins forgiven, you first have to feel the grief of the sins. He knew Jesus' words, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4).

Don't sit passively and wait for resolution in a conflict to happen spontaneously. James gives ten active commands in machine-gun fashion in these four verses: Submit to God! Resist the devil! Draw near to God! Cleanse your hands! Purify your heart! Be miserable! Mourn! Weep! Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into gloom! Humble yourself! God's way to resolve conflicts is to submit to Him, resist the devil, and repent of all sin.

Application Questions

1. Agree/disagree: Almost all relational conflicts are rooted in one or both parties not being fully in submission to God.
2. Why is an angry or bitter person necessarily distant from God? Consider Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 4:31; 1 John 4:20.
3. How can we know if the devil is actively involved in a relational conflict that we are experiencing? Are there signs?
4. How do we know if our repentance is sincere enough or deep enough? What if we do not have feelings of grief or mourning?

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