

HOW TO HANDLE STRIFE

By: David Roper

I have come to the very profound conclusion that almost all of the conflict in the world is caused by people. I think my life would be much simpler if there weren't people around. I could really have a great ministry if it weren't for all the people. I would be a great father if I didn't have children.

Unfortunately, I'm not sure that is true, because a few weeks ago I read of a medieval character, Simon Stylites, who spent his life sitting on a pole because he wanted to get away from people. He came down after eighteen years—couldn't stand himself. So I don't think it would do any good to get away from people, because we ourselves are part of that particular group.

It seems inevitable that wherever we go we have to be with people. And sooner or later we come into conflict with them. I would be willing to go on record as saying that today or tomorrow you are going to be in conflict with someone. Therefore, conflict is a very relevant subject. I would like to talk about conflict in the light of two passages of scripture, both of which have been very helpful to me. I don't always obey these particular injunctions, and I don't always handle conflict correctly.—but I think I know how to handle conflict, for the Scriptures tell us very clearly what we are to do. The two passages I have in mind are James 4:1-10 and Genesis 13. First, I would like to introduce you to the New Testament principle in James 4, and then we will see that principle illustrated in the life of Abraham. James 4:1 asks:

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?

That is a good question. It is the question for which the United Nations was established—to find the root causes of war and to eradicate them. The UN has not found the source of war yet, and it certainly has not done away with war. James asks a question that is very appropriate, and then he answers it in the same verse:

Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?

The pursuit of pleasure, James says, is the root of all conflict. The English word “hedonism” comes from the term that James uses in this verse and which is translated “pleasures” in the New American Standard version. Hedonism sees the pursuit of pleasure and its accomplishment as the highest good, and therefore we don't think too highly of hedonism. We see it as contrary to what we believe is true.

However, James uses the term here to speak of the pursuit of legitimate pleasures—the desire to be approved, to be loved, to be fed, to be housed and warm, to be adequately cared for. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with pursuing pleasure. What James is saying is that very often, in the pursuit of legitimate pleasure, I will run head-on with someone else who is pursuing pleasure, and that is what creates conflict. It is not always illegitimate goals that cause conflict—sometimes those goals are very proper. These goals may be right, they may be your rightful inheritance as an individual, but the pursuit of them will cause you to run into someone else. That creates frustration and conflict because, for the moment, your own desires and drives are thwarted. James says in verse 2:

You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.

It is characteristic of James that he does not speak in nuances. He makes a flat-out statement: “This is why you murder people.” Most murders are crimes of passion. I read recently of one murder that occurred because two men were fighting over a parking space. It is just that sort of common, ordinary thing that causes people to flare up in anger. When James speaks of lust, it is not in terms of sexual lust. Our word “lust” is used almost exclusively that way. But James has in mind the pursuit of any passion, any pleasure. If you are pursuing it ardently, and if you are frustrated and thwarted enough times, you will murder someone.

Then he says, “You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.” Now James’ point is that it is not wrong to pursue things that give you pleasure, but it is wrong to pursue them without reference to God. You should ask. You should let God give you things that are pleasurable. Let God fulfill you in his own way, in his own time, according to his own time schedule. We don’t have, James says, because we don’t ask. And when we do ask, he tells us further, in verse 3, we ask with the wrong motive. We want to use things for our own consumption, and so we ask with the wrong motives. motives.

In verse 4 James describes that sort of pursuit as being adulterous. When we are like that we are a friend of the world. It is so normal to pursue things that give you pleasure that you don’t think of yourself as an adulteress, or as an enemy of God and a friend of the world when you do. But James is saying that when we pursue our own desires without reference to God, we are like a wife who is pursuing legitimate desires, but goes to someone other than her husband to secure them. She needs money to pay the rent, so she goes next door and gets it from the neighbor. She needs money to buy groceries, so she goes to the man across the street. Or if she needs counsel, she seeks counsel with someone else’s husband. She derives her emotional strength and financial reward from someone else’s husband. James says that is what we do when we try to satisfy our demands apart from God. When we run ruthlessly roughshod over people to get what we think is legitimately ours, we are adulteresses. We are seeking our own pleasure outside of our relationship with our husband.

Furthermore, James says, we are a friend of the world because this is the attitude of secular society. The whole world is endued with this philosophy. Whatever you want, assert yourself and get it. When you align yourself with that philosophy, James says, you have become a friend of the world, and that constitutes you as an enemy of God. On the contrary, God just wants to give. That is his heart. In verse 5, James says:

Or do you think that the Scripture [James is talking about the whole range of the Old Testament scripture, because that is all he had at his disposal] speaks to no purpose: “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us”?

If the Old Testament establishes anything, it establishes that God is like a husband who jealously desires Israel, his Bride, and wants to lavish his attention, his love, his care, and his resources on her. The Israelites flaunted that love and were adulterous in their relationship, both spiritually and physically. God jealously desired the kind of relationship that would be fulfilling to his people, and they didn’t want it. But God jealously desired it. And James says that is the same Lord who jealously desires you.

In verse 6, James says,

But He gives a greater grace.”

He gives a grace—a gift greater than you can receive by pursuing your passions on you own—a grace greater than the world can give, a grace greater than any other resource. He wants to give, and give, and give. That is the kind of Lord we have. He does not want to withhold one good thing from you or from me. He wants us to have everything good, worthwhile, valuable, proper, and constructive. And he will give it. So why do we seek it apart from God?—because we want it according to our time schedule. We want it now. So we trample over people, and engage in arguments and conflict with people because we want it now. God says, “Wait. I will give it to you. Ask me, and I will give you the desires of you heart.” In verse 7, James says:

Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

There are really only two alternatives in life. You either are resisting God, or you are resisting the devil. If you are submitting to God, then you are resisting the devil. You submit when you are willing to say, Lord, I will take it from your hand. When you want to give it to me, according to the way you want to give it, I will submit myself to your schedule, forgetting whatever it is that is legitimately mine.”

Therefore we resist Satan’s attempts to make us self-assertive and to grasp things on our own. That is his philosophy. That is what got him into trouble in the beginning. He wanted to assert himself. And that is the philosophy with which he has endued the entire world. “Get it now! Assert yourself now! If you want to be on the top, crawl to the top. It does not matter who you have to crawl over, get there!”

This is alien to everything we know from scripture, and to pursue that line of thought is to constitute yourself as an enemy of God. That is what James says. On the contrary, we ought to submit ourselves to God, receive what he wants to give us, and thus resist the devil. James continues in verse 8:

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. [Just like any loving husband—if you draw near to him, he will draw near to you.] Cleanse you hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miser-able and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to gloom.

James is saying that we are to take seriously these bad attitudes that cause so much distress and conflict in the world. We are not playing penny-ante, we are not playing for nickels and dimes; we are playing for life. It is a serious matter to destroy relationships, create conflict, and tear things up. God wants to build, unite, reconcile, and heal. To destroy a relationship in the pursuit of some goal that we have is a serious thing. We ought to weep and mourn about the attitudes that create that sort of environment. It is not a laughing matter, it is not to be taken lightly. James' conclusion is found in verse 10:

Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

That is a summary statement of all that James has said before. Submit to God, humble yourself under his hand, because, by the way, it is his hand that is oppressing you. It is not merely that your neighbor happens to want the same thing that you want at the same time that you want it; it is God's hand on you. So submit to him, and let him exalt you. Don't exalt yourself—that is a frightful alternative. It creates conflict and discord and destroys what God is doing. It makes us an adulteress and aligns us with the purposes of the world, which are contrary to what God is doing. This is a serious matter.

There is the principle. Now let's look at the illustration of the principle in Genesis 13. In Genesis 12 we are told about the call of Abram. He was called out of Ur of the Chaldees and spent some time in Haran, what today is modern Syria. After the death of his father, Abram was given another call and was told that he would be the recipient of every blessing that God would give and that he was to be a blessing to the world. The Hebrew term "blessing" comes from a word that is rooted back in the culture of that time and means "to bend the knee." At the end of a patriarch's life, the patriarch of a particular clan or tribe would bestow the largest portion of his inheritance on the firstborn. The firstborn would kneel before the patriarch, who would place his hand on his head and bless him. That is why the idea of bending the knee is foundational to the term. The patriarch would bless him—he would bestow upon him worth, value. The patriarch would give his firstborn the resources that he had owned. Now that is what it means to be a blessing to someone—to give him the resources to face life and its demands.

Primarily, Abram was called to bless people in the spiritual sense. He and all of his descendants would be the means by which the entire world would be blessed. And that is true. It is from the Jewish people that the Word and Jesus the Messiah came. Abram was called into the most wicked culture of his day. He wasn't called to be a separatist, to isolate himself and to live in the desert in a cave; he was called to be a blessing to a Canaanite culture.

The account in chapter 12 records his migration south, down one of the trade routes, to the city of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. It was there the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So Abram built an altar there to the Lord. Then he moved on with his flocks and tents to Bethel.

Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord.

He began to reckon on all that the name of the Lord signifies. God's name signifies what he is—it is his character. So Abram now begins to count on what God is, to trust him, believe him, and act out of his resources. The account continues to describe Abram's migration to the south through the Negev, and eventually down to Egypt. I personally do not believe that Abram was wrong in going to Egypt. God wanted him to be a blessing there.

But when he got to Egypt, Abram began to look out for himself. He began to protect himself. He lied about his

wife and called her his sister, for fear that Pharaoh would take her and kill him. Instead of being a blessing in Egypt, he was a curse. The result of his sojourn in Egypt was that he was escorted to the borders and kicked out. Literally, instead of a blessing, he became a plague, a curse in Egypt. But in chapter 13:1-4 we read:

So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, he and his wife and all that belonged to him; and Lot with him. Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold. And he went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place of the altar, which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord.

If you observe the passage from chapter 12 verse 8 through chapter 13 verse 4, there is not one reference to an altar, nor did Abram call on the name of the Lord. He was going it alone through the Negev; he was counting on himself, and that is what caused him to be a curse in Egypt.

What this passage says to me up to this point is that the sort of demands that are made of me, as a believer, are supernatural. Therefore, I need a supernatural resource. It is only as I call on the name of the Lord, as did Abram, that I am able to fulfill the demands of the gospel. Otherwise I can't be a blessing to anyone; I'll just be a curse. My relationship with people grows out of my relationship with God. The only way I can fulfill the requirements of chapter 4 of the book of James is to call upon the name of the Lord. That is my resource.

Another striking thing about this passage is that Abram had to go back to where he was in the beginning in order to recall this fact. I get the impression that as Abram moved from one camping place to the next, he was trying to recapture something that he had lost. The side note of the New American Standard version says in verse 3 that he went "by his stages" back to the campsite that he had established earlier. I think in each case he was looking for something that he had lost. Something was gone. It wasn't until he had gone back to the place where he began that he recaptured the foundational truth of his life: he must call on the name of the Lord.

Now the Scriptures are not saying that we have to go back to the beginning and work our way through the process again in order to get to a place where God can use us. I am sure all of you have played children's games where you move the marker along and, just as you are about to win, someone else's marker lands on your spot and you have to go back to the beginning and start all over again. A lot of people think that is the way the Christian life is. You are doing well, and all of a sudden there is some huge, colossal failure in your life, and you go back to the very beginning and have to start all over again. After a period of time you accrue worth and power and value, and then you are able to respond the right way to people. But that is not true. That is not the picture of God's grace the Scriptures give us.

The point of beginning is to call on the name of God. Every moment is a beginning when you call on the name of the Lord. It doesn't matter how frequently you have destroyed a relationship in the past, or yesterday, or this morning. This moment is a new beginning. You can begin now to call on the name of God and he will give you the grace. Remember, he is the one who wants to give. He gives the greater grace so you can respond in the right way in that relationship you are destroying.

Every moment is a new beginning. It is just like a golf game: every hole is a new beginning. It doesn't matter what you shot on the last hole; you are a new man when you stand on the tee. The only difference between golf and the Christian life is that God doesn't keep accumulative scores. Every moment is new.

That is what Jeremiah says, "It is of the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning." That moment was a new beginning for Israel.

The Israelites could start all over again. They could begin to count on God's grace to supply all that they needed.

That is what this passage tells us. There is power in the name of Jesus Christ. When we lay hold of that power, then we have the resources to respond, and God expects us to respond. That is something we can do at any time, any place, regardless of the failures of the past. What an encouragement that is, because who of us can't remember something we have done or said this past week that has been very destructive in terms of a relationship with someone. We would like to go back and do it over again, and we can't. But in God's eyes, it is gone, forgotten. Today is a new beginning. Genesis 13:5-7 continues:

Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. And the land could not sustain them while dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they were not able to remain together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's live-stock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling then in the land.

This reference to the Canaanites and Perizzites is not merely to tell us that there was a lot of pressure and competition for the grazing area because the Canaanites and Perizzites had flocks there as well. The Canaanites lived in the cities, and the Perizzites lived in the valleys, so there was some pressure there. But the point that is being made here (because of the place where this statement is introduced) is that the conflict between brothers was a serious thing because it was taking place in front of these pagans.

God loved these wicked people and he wanted them to be joined to him. What was most important to God was that his own people demonstrate unity and love in the midst of this horribly debased culture, where there was no love, no unity. The Canaanites and Perizzites were dividing up into warring city-states, and no one could get along with anyone else. That is why I said we are not playing penny-ante; we are playing for lives. It was crucial that Abram and Lot resolve their conflict in a godly way, so they would not display all this ugliness to the Canaanite society. Verses 8-9:

Then Abram said to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me: if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left."

How gracious! From chapter 12 we know that Abram was given the title deed to the whole land; it all belonged to him. He was also the patriarch of that clan, and had the right to expel Lot and all his herds, if he wanted to. That would have been the simplest way to resolve that particular issue. Get rid of the man, get him out of sight. He certainly had the right to do that. But, magnanimously, he let Lot choose. He took Lot up on the mountain close to Ai, overlooking the Jordan Valley, and Lot made the choice (verses 10-13):

And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere—this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah—like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar. So Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan; and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord. [That is, sinners blatantly in front of the Lord. They didn't care who saw what they did.]

The topography of Israel was different then. It appears that there was no Dead Sea; the Jordan River flowed through the Jordan Valley all the way to the Red Sea, and the circle of the Jordan that is described here is the fertile area that extends from Jericho down to the south where Sodom used to be. It is well irrigated—in fact, that is actually the term that is used to describe the Jordan Valley here. It does not refer to rain or natural sources of water, but rather to an irrigation system that the Sodomites had established that made that valley a fertile place, like the garden of Eden, like Egypt.

And that is the place that Lot chose. If you had your pick of all the portions of the land, that is where you would go, too. Now that is not true today—you would go anywhere but there today—but at that time that was the choice place to graze your flocks. Lot's choice was not only wrong, it was bad, as subsequent history demonstrates. It was not many months before several Mesopotamian kings, tired of the rebellion of these Sodomites, invaded the area and took Lot and his family away. If it were not for the intervention of Abram, Lot would have lost his life.

Some years later, as you know, the city of Sodom was destroyed. Lot escaped, but he lost everything. He lost his flocks and herds and the people who were with him; he lost his wife, he lost his two daughters (at least they were lost in that they bought the philosophies of Sodom), and his name is best remembered today as one whose descendants were the result of incest. He lost everything because he chose without reference to God. He chose what appeared to be best. He picked out what he thought would be everything that he wanted, what would best meet his needs—but he didn't ask God. He just chose, and his choice was wrong. It resulted in the destruction of everything he considered valuable and precious to life. But notice what is said of Abram in verses 14-18:

And the Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Now lift up your eyes and look

from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered. Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you.” Then Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord.

From the same promontory where Lot had seen the circle of the Jordan, God said to Abram, “Look and see. Look to the north, up the long ridge of the Judean mountains; look to the south into Galilee; look to the east and to the west toward the sea. That is yours; I have given it to you. This is my choice for you. And not only that, I will people this land with your descendants. You will have thousands of descendants. I will bless you.” So Abram went on an inspection tour of his land and camped on one site and then the next, until he went to Hebron, a beautiful spot 3,000 feet up in the mountains of Judea. He chose that as his dwelling place, but he owned it all. God gave it all to him.

And that is what God will do if you will let him choose. If we, like Lot, choose for ourselves (and that is actually the term that was used—Lot chose for himself) then God will let us destroy our-selves—unfortunately. But if we let God choose, then he will give us the best. Someone has said, “Lot chose grass, and Abraham chose grace.” And that is our choice. We can’t trust our senses, we can’t trust our own evaluation, our judgment of what ought to be done and when it ought to be done and how it ought to be done; we can only trust God. When we let him choose, let him set the time schedule and determine when and how things shall be, he will give us the very best. As James says, “Humble your-selves under the mighty hand of God, and he will exalt you in due time.”

Father, if we were to set out to determine the best way to solve our problems, we certainly wouldn't pick this one. It runs so contrary to us to give up our rights to say “no” to ourselves and to wait, to allow you to satisfy us yourself. We do need grace for that sort of decision. We thank you that you give the greater grace, and that you continue to give, and that you satisfy us with yourself while we wait. Lord, thank you that as we call upon your name we are able to respond to these things. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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