

# How to Make Peace

M. W. Bassford, 8-14-11

One of the things that most impresses me about the Scripture is its economy of thought. If God had asked any of us to write the Bible for Him, we would probably have come up with a multi-volume series tens of thousands of pages in length, a work so big that no one person could possibly be familiar with all of it. God's plan, however, was completely different. He condensed everything we need to know about life and godliness into 66 short books that a child can hold in his hands. However, the Bible is so compactly written that just a few words in it can capture a whole range of ideas.

We see a marvelous example of this brief, elegant expression of thought in James 3:16-17. At least by my count, the NKJ version of this verse contains 40 words, but those 40 words describe an entire way of life. This verse came to my attention a couple of weeks ago when I decided I wanted to write a sermon on peacemaking. Just like I always do when I'm writing a topical sermon, I searched for "peace" in the concordance on my computer, and it pulled up a range of verses, one of which was James 3:17. I read the verse, and I said to myself, "That's all I need to say right there."

This is clearly a text with a wide range of application in our lives. Conflict is one of the unpleasant realities of human existence, and these conflicts can easily destroy our marriages, our other family relationships, our friendships, and our relationships at work. At the heart of every one of those disasters is the problem that James identifies right here. Conflict arises from envy and self-seeking. When we choose to be selfish or when we resent the good things that someone else has, quarrels are the inevitable result. However, if we walk the path that James identifies in the next verse, we can keep ourselves from creating conflict and minimize those that do occur. Let's learn how to make peace.

## Pure, Peaceable, Gentle, Reasonable

James heads this entire list, though, with his admonition to **BE PURE FIRST**. This tells us that in our efforts to patch up quarrels, we must be careful that our compromises don't compromise our relationship with God. James presents His expectations for purity in James 4:8. There is only one way for us to enjoy the nearness of our Father in our lives, and that is by having righteous lives and pure hearts. As we all know, though, just as God pulls us in that one direction, the world often pulls us in the opposite direction. Our adherence to God's law will bring us into conflict with those who refuse to honor those laws. If we want peace with them, we will have to leave the Scripture behind.

We are often presented with this choice in our dealings with non-Christian family members. They refuse to go to church with us, they resent our efforts to bring them to the Lord, and they may even ask us to stop going to church ourselves or otherwise disobey God. We can strike those compromises in our families for the sake of peace, but if we do, we are no longer living as disciples of Jesus. In His own life on earth, our Lord endured strife with His own earthly family because of His insistence on proclaiming the gospel. If we follow Him, and strife is the result, so be it.

We don't have the right to go back on the truth, but neither should we go around looking for trouble. Instead, God wants us to **BE PEACEABLE**. Paul elaborates on this concept in Romans 12:18. Sometimes, the Scripture forces conflict upon us. At other times, we're dealing with someone who is determined to pick a fight with us no matter what. In those cases, there is nothing we can do to prevent discord. The rest of the time, though, it is our responsibility to work to avoid dispute. For some Christians, this comes very naturally. They don't enjoy arguments, and they aren't interested in being right all the time, so they usually look for ways to defuse relationship bombs before they go off. Then, on the other hand, you have people like my family. When all of the Bassfords get together for Thanksgiving dinner, conversation is a contact sport. That's not a problem as long as everything stays on the level of detached back-and-forth, but it's all too easy for people to get emotionally involved and for feelings to get hurt. For those of us who, like me, are naturally inclined to verbal jousting, it's worth considering the consequences before we start galloping at somebody. Is it really that important that they hear our opinion on the matter? Do we have to be right and get our way about this? If we take a deep breath and count to 10, will we still care about it next week? If the answer is "No", we are better off staying quiet.

Likewise, we must remember to **BE GENTLE**. Titus captures this idea well in Titus 3:1-2. Much of the time, when a conflict gets out of hand, the problem is not just what people have said, it's how they have said it. Some situation arises, and instead of spending some time thinking about how to express ourselves in a wise and humble way, we put our stomping boots on, march over to the other person, and start stomping on them. This is particularly easy on the Internet. Somebody has said something on Facebook or a message board that that we don't like, we get all righteous and indignant about it, and in about fifteen seconds, we've posted a reply that makes it perfectly clear what an idiot the other guy is.

That may make us feel good, but it does nothing to persuade others or make peace with them. Whenever we're addressing the other side of a dispute, we must always remember the goal. Our goal is not that rush of adrenaline that comes from really socking it to our spouse or our friend. Our goal is to build the relationship, to make their lives and our lives better. When our focus is on the relationship and not the verbal cage match, we will not be harsh, but gentle.

Of course, making peace isn't all about what we say. We must also remember to listen and to **BE WILLING TO YIELD**. In the Greek, this is all one word, and it's the only time in Scripture that that word is used. However, we see a fine example of people who weren't willing to yield in Jeremiah 44:4-5. God pleaded with the people of Judah. He begged them to return to Him, but they killed every messenger He sent and continued to disobey. Sadly, it's all too easy for us to follow that negative example. We've got our mind made up about some issue before the discussion even starts, and even if Jesus were to come down from heaven and argue the other side, there is nothing He could possibly say that would change our mind. There is no better way to make somebody mad than by showing that we aren't listening.

Instead, even if we could not disagree more with the guy on the other side, we always owe him the courtesy of an honest audience. I'm sure this has never happened to anybody else here, but believe it or not, there have been times in my life when I have held a belief, even strongly held a belief, and been completely wrong. I will even go so far as to venture that I will probably be wrong again sometime in the future, and one of the best ways to learn when I'm wrong is by listening to someone who disagrees with me. Conflict isn't an opportunity for us to win converts to our way of thinking. It's an opportunity for us to find truth together, and we show our love for the truth by being willing to yield.

### **Merciful, Fruitful, Impartial, Sincere**

We also go a long way toward peacemaking when we are willing to **BE MERCIFUL**. This is especially important when conflict comes up in a long-running relationship, like a marriage. Sometimes, I get the vibe that in some marriages, the husband or the wife is almost glad when his or her partner does something that's clearly wrong. It's like their spouse has just handed them a weapon, and they're going to wield that weapon mercilessly for as long as the marriage lasts. Husband does something bad and apologizes? Wife doesn't care. Five years from now, she's still going to be dusting the cobwebs off of the incident and using it to clobber him. That attitude makes conflicts inevitable.

However, earthly strife is not the worst product of a merciless attitude. Look what James says about it in James 2:13. If we don't show any mercy to people here, on the day of judgment, God isn't going to show us any mercy either. It doesn't matter if we faithfully attended church service for 60 years. If we are merciless, we will spend eternity with the devil and his angels, and we will deserve it. If we don't like that outcome, we need to learn to forgive one another from the heart, even if there's still a big part of us that's mad about the misdeed. That kind of mercy makes peace.

It's also important for us to **BE FRUITFUL**. Much of the time, we can remove our conflicts with others simply by improving our own behavior. Peter provides an example of this in 1 Peter 2:12. If people don't like us because they're prejudiced against Christians, we're not going to argue them out of that position. Instead, we should use our righteous, loving behavior to persuade them that being a Christian is a good thing, not a bad one. Nor is this limited to the religious sphere. If we've got a boss, for instance, who's unhappy with our production at work, the best way for us to end the conflict is by improving that production. Once the issue goes away, the quarrel often goes away too.

This is easy to say, but it's often difficult to do, because it requires us to take an honest look at our behavior and determine where we have been falling short. None of us like to admit that somebody does have a genuine bone to pick with us. However, that admission, combined with a genuine change in our behavior, is the only way we can follow Christ.

We can also go a long way toward making sure that quarrels never arise by learning to **BE IMPARTIAL**. Paul describes this idea in a church context in 1 Timothy 5:21. There are few things that will damage a church more than the perception that the church leadership plays favorites. Member A is a drunk, so he gets run out of the church in six weeks. Member B, on the other hand, is in an unscriptural marriage, but she's good friends with one of the elders' wives, so she's been allowed to remain a member in good standing for the past 20 years. Once the members pick up on what's going on, those elders have lost whatever moral authority they had. Preachers can run into the same difficulty, if they preach three times a month on the spiritual problems of the members they don't like, but their buddies get a free pass.

As Christians, we must take care that we apply a consistent standard. We need look no further than the story of Joseph and the coat of many colors to see the problems with parents playing favorites. Because Joseph's father loved him more than his brothers, they hated him and eventually sold him into slavery. The brothers were to blame for that sin, but Daddy was to blame too, because he created the situation. By contrast, when we are impartial, we defuse conflict.

Finally, when we are embroiled in a dispute, we must work to **BE SINCERE**. Paul points out the importance of his sincerity in 2 Corinthians 1:12. In all of his dealings with the Corinthian church, Paul had always conducted himself in a simple, sincere manner. Now that some of his enemies were bringing charges against him, Paul could rely on that track record of sincerity to deflect the accusations. Paul had established that he could be trusted.

It's often tempting for us to take the other approach, to rely on fleshly wisdom in our arguments. This fleshly wisdom will lead us to conceal our real motivation in a conflict, to manipulate others into giving us what we want, or to refuse to acknowledge when the other has made a point. We become so determined to win that we don't really care how we get there. These dirty tactics, and others like them, may help us wring concessions from our opponent, but they poison the overall relationship. We must be open and forthright in our discussions if we want to see the best result.