

“Chronic Conflict”

Sermon for 29 August 2021

Texts: Acts 17:30-31; Galatians 2:1-10 & James 3:13-4:12

How would our lives unfold differently if we asked, “Lord, what can I do that would bring God the greatest praise, honor and glory? Lord how can I deport myself so as to align my life with the purposes of Christ in what I think, say, imagine and do with myself this day?” If there is any selfish ambition in either request, someone else must point it out to me. I don’t see it. And what if my petitions were answered by a heavenly restraining order, “a cease and desist order” that read: Stop with the fighting, and desist from further provocation.

What can I do that would bring God(!) the greatest praise, honor and glory? I hope that everyone hearing that would immediately identify it with the life and calling of the Lord Jesus Christ. He loved the Father and did only those things which would yield praise, honor and glory to the Father. And what defined Christ’s mission would certainly be useful as a guideline for every Christian. If you find yourself in “chronic conflict,” praying for help in submitting to God’s “cease and desist order” would be a useful first step—one of submission and obedience. That said, I must say, I am considering the “chronic conflict” that is represented by Galatians 2:1-10. The passage addresses acceptance and rejection: Paul’s acceptance by the apostles as presented against the backdrop of the rejection of those who set themselves against him (and God!) in the work of the Gentile mission.

The Gentile mission. Where did it come from? What was its source? Well, the right answer, the Sunday School response, is: “It came from the will of God. And Jesus was its source because He is Lord of All and Savior of the world.” If this were true, which it is, we might assume that everyone would see it the same way and the controversy would go away. *But that is not how it goes in this world of “chronic conflict.”* And the stock answers are inadequate because they spring from what we’ve been told rather than from what we know. So, let’s slow walk that “will of God” piece. We know the will of God, with regard to the Gentile mission, by virtue of Jesus’ activity: His ministry to the Gerasene demoniac, the Roman centurion, and the Syro-Phoenician woman are very pointed, although complex, extensions of the mission to Israel and beyond. Indeed, the extensions are dealt with as exceptional in the texts themselves. So we learn that first is not meant in an exclusionary way, but sequentially. And this presses us into the matter of its source: Jesus as Savior of the world. And if that brought glory to God, praise and honor, we may be certain that our extension of that work achieves the same end.

The question of rejection of that mission, particularly of Paul’s explicitly called role in the Gentile mission, now arises. It is painful to acknowledge just how cantankerous we, the people of God, can be. But we appear to be prone to, if not addicted to “chronic conflict.” Brothers and sisters, such things should not be. Now our brother James, fully cognizant of this bent, or condition, offers some godly counsel. We are going to attend to his counsel despite, or in preference to other sources of “wisdom.” There are plenty of political theorists, philosophers (a school of “critical conflict theory” actually exists), social scientists, psychologists and psychiatrists who offer us data, statistics, theories and various jargon (specialized language and terminology— things like complexes, neuroses, psychoses, oppressors and victimizers, class warfare and critical legal/race theory) but, lacking divine inspiration, they are all suspect (by which I mean humanistic, limited and reductionist).

“Chronic conflict” predates all of them, and, of course, the scientific revolution which spawned them. Here’s James: **Who is wise and understanding among you? (3:13)** Let’s not mistake this for a rhetorical gesture. James assumes, as we should, that such persons exist even in our generation. **By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.** (v.13) He could have been defending Paul, by citing his **good conduct**; but that, most likely would be a stretch of application. [SLOW WAY DOWN.] However, **Meekness of wisdom** is a phrase aimed at communicating “spiritual gentleness” (*prauteti*, #4240—For the believer, meekness (4240 /*praýtēs*, “gentle-force”) begins with the Lord’s inspiration and finishes by His direction and empowerment. It is a *divinely-balanced* virtue that can only operate through faith (cf. 1 Tim 6:11; 2 Tim 2:22-25).) which occurs here—established a vital temperamental bond between James and Paul! Yes, a bond which we should share with them and one another!

Further, Paul uses this same word (*prauteti*,) in Gal. 5:23(!), right next to “self-control” (*engkrateia*, #1466 *egkráteia* (from 1722 /*en*, “in the sphere of” and 2904 /*krátos*, “dominion, mastery”) – properly, *dominion within*, i.e. “self- proceeding out from *within* oneself, but *not by oneself*. James and Paul are speaking the same language: Greek!

For believers, self-control, [1466 /*engkráteia* (“self-control, Spirit-control”) can only be accomplished *by the power of the Lord*. Accordingly, 1466 /*egkráteia* (“true mastery from within”) is explicitly called a *fruit of the Holy Spirit* (Gal 5:23).] Meekness and self-control are marks of a Spirit-controlled temperament—or, if we prefer, inward divine disposition. They describe one who has “stopped fighting and desisted from further provocation;” one who is **heavenly-minded**, acting with **wisdom from above** (v. 15)

James reveals to us the **wisdom that is from below, which is earthly, unspiritual and demonic.** (v.15) The first denotes things pertaining to the physical life, mundane and ordinary stuff. But followed, as it is, by *psychikos* #5591, meaning soul/natural identity (carnal) *in contrast to the spiritual* (#4152/*pneumatikos*) which is realized through faith! and by *diamoniodes* #1141 meaning demonical/ devilish we grasp that this is evil, certainly “not good.”

This business of wisdom from above, versus wisdom from below sets up a contrast between **earthly, unspiritual and demoniacal** AND that which is **pure peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.** (ESV) Or **But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, free of hypocrisy** (NASB) where **sincere** is amplified as **free of hypocrisy**—the CSB, Christian Standard Bible, has **without pretense** instead.

Because this is very important to understand, I will cite the Amplified Bible version: **But the wisdom from above is first pure** [morally and spiritually undefiled], **then peace-loving** [courteous, considerate], **gentle, reasonable** [and willing to listen], **full of compassion and good fruits. It is unwavering, without** [self-righteous] **hypocrisy** [and self-serving guile]. Yes, this version is highly interpretative—not literal, or plain!—but, note the sequence: morally and spiritually undefiled (is this more helpful than “pure”?), willing to listen (a studied contrast to accusation and flame-throwing rhetoric), not self-righteous (is there any other kind of hypocrisy?) and self-serving guile (is this jealous ambition?).

These touches of attitude/motivation added to “interpret the text” seem to add “context” and may, I emphasize may help us characterize the animosity that Paul was faced with. His opponents have had evil (impure) motives; they appear to have been both discourteous and inconsiderate (ruthless, actually); close-minded (as in prejudice/biased—as the indignant often are!); yes, self-righteous and treacherous—we would say, politically motivated?—because self-serving. This, taken all together, plainly describes much that a hard look in the mirror might expose. And we wonder why there is so much “Chronic conflict?”

This is an excellent place to interject a warning Jesus gave in Matt. 7:3-5:

3 Why do you look at the [a¹]speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 4 Or how [b]can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the [c]speck out of your eye, 'and look, the log is in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the [d]speck out of your brother's eye!

When we are mainly focused on the faults in another (even one's spouse!), we are, I fear, liable to the charge of hypocrisy, or, if not that the kind of jumping to conclusion as exemplified in (assuming we know what the other person is trying to say *before they've even managed to speak a word!*) And so we are hurt, angry or offended *preemptively* because we want to control the conversation rather than to communicate, or to relate truthfully! This is like prejudging, or deciding to be offended in advance.

Perhaps I should illustrate: Paul accuses his opponents of **spying out our freedom that we have in Christ, so that they might bring us into slavery.** (v. 4) Question: Does the accusatory approach (tone) here work? Doesn't it reflect presumption? Does the interrogative approach work better? Telling differs from asking—the first is a conclusion, the second seeks one. The peaceable approach assumes the right to disagree *without being disagreeable*—scathing speech aimed at “torching,” or “slamming” one's opponent is disagreeable by definition and by intent! **They answered Him not a word** may be affected without either; the truth silences its opponents on its own.

Why would they want to **spy out** our Christian freedom? Did they assume that our freedom was merely a cover for lawlessness, for licentiousness (which was their stated objection elsewhere in Scripture)? Or, were they just suspicious, insecure and fearful? What if they were “truth warriors,” much as we have social justice warriors—very big on all that's wrong and very short on what's right?! Most adamant over what they want, but rather ignorant about their **jealousy and selfish ambition**—their “logs.” Where is that mirror when I need it?

Saved by grace through faith in Christ alone is a very scary idea if one has been raised expecting to be saved by conformity to the law and performance of the law. Paul's

¹ Footnotes

- a. Matthew 7:3 Or *splinter*
- b. Matthew 7:4 Lit *will*
- c. Matthew 7:4 Or *splinter*
- d. Matthew 7:5 Or *splinter*

doctrine would be unfamiliar, or unsettling. In Paul's eyes they were abandoning the **work of the cross** and **the power of the resurrection!** (2 Tim. 2:19) But, being charged with "espionage" and with an overt desire to trouble and oppress others could actually produce more heat than light. (Paul's detractors would most likely deny these charges!) It's like accusing someone of being a racist! Even if we grant that Paul is more alarmed than angry, we can sympathize with the other side and wish that everyone would just "Calm Down," engage in some sober reflection and, active listening, and thereby seek to "hear" what is trying to be communicated. *It really, really helps if we are committed to mutual understanding!*

I don't want to be "heard" as merely defending Paul's opponents; but there are two sides to every story. (Or, as the saying goes, "It takes two to tangle.") So we may recall that these "critics" have accused Paul of being a "false apostle²," and they have insinuated that he couldn't possibly have had his revelation **directly from God** (as Paul stoutly maintained). No one "hears" from God that way! At least not from their religious perspective and experience—and we know this because they were NOT "hearing" from God through Paul's preaching. So, they seek to flatten the world and suggest that Paul had to have **learned incorrectly from the apostles in Jerusalem** who certainly had not cast off all the trappings of Jewish traditionalism (up until his death, we are informed by church tradition, the Apostle John kept the Jewish Passover on the fourteenth day of Nisan!). The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem certainly did practice circumcision as a sign of continued covenant participation *at that time!* *That was never the question! The question was this: is Jewish ceremonial law (dietary laws, temple worship and circumcision) binding on Gentile converts!*

The chronic conflict in Galatians 2:1-10 suggests that they weren't talking to each other. *They were talking past each other—it happens often!* Furthermore, if we return to James, there was clear evidence **for lust for power, dominance and control** (the **plank in the eye** of the Judaizers, perhaps) was operative. Yes, we infer this from the **murderous intent** which those who hated and feared Paul manifested on a regular basis (both on the mission field and in Jerusalem). And, it would appear, **they were envious** of Paul's success—the Gentile church was booming, far overshadowing the church growth in Jerusalem! There was a shift of power manifest in the constituency of the body of Christ as Jewish Christians came to be outnumbered, losing in popularity. This envy provoked their **jealousy for the traditions of their fathers** which, as we remember, was a major stumbling block for Paul himself. Perhaps they couldn't find their feet and were stumbling as the church moved forward. And as they were unable to wrest control (through **ungodly ambition**) from Paul directly, they sought to sabotage his work indirectly.

There is so much here to cover. We must allow for that another time and perhaps we can bring more home from the mission field. I am looking forward to that.

Amen.

² They also impugned his integrity (falsely) and insinuated that he was "a people-pleasing," liar. See Gal. 1:10. I chose to refrain from the most inflammatory accusations—the rest are sufficient to frame the dispute.

