

Root of Conflict

September 19, 2021

Psalm 1:1-6 *(earlier in worship)*

¹ Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, ² but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. ³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither — whatever they do prospers. ⁴ Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. ⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. ⁶ For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace...

¹ Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ² You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask.³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁴ Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, "God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? ⁶ But he gives all the more grace; therefore, it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."⁷ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Mark 9:30-37

³⁰ They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹ for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again."³² But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³ Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?"³⁴ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

³⁵ He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

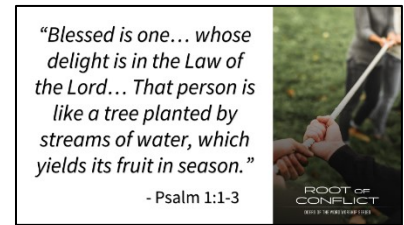
³⁶ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷ "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."



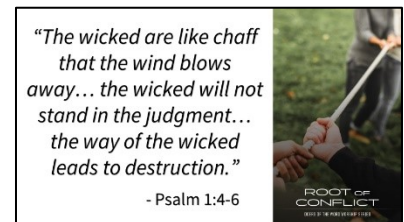
This morning we wrestle with what it really means to submit ourselves to God. Building upon the previous ideas around avoiding anger as we are quick to listen

and slow to speak, around the caution against making distinctions as we live out our faith, and around the practice of taming our tongues, today we focus in on drawing near to God so that God will draw near to us. The emphasis will be on surrendering to God in a way that leads to behavioral change. This is, of course, not a one-time surrender. Being made into a disciple of Jesus Christ is a life-long process or cycle of surrender and transformation. The call to deny self and to take up our cross is a daily call. The practice of taming our tongue is not just for certain situations or with specific people. The awareness of the distinctions that we make and the ways that these distinctions influence how we see and care for and treat others is continual. The habits of being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger are ones that must be reinforced over and over, until these practices become who we are. Our passages today are scriptures that lead us towards self-examination and introspection. As we prepare to enter into this time in the word of God, let us offer this prayer of surrender...

We began our worship today with Psalm 1. The opening words to this Psalm connect into the idea of right living and of drawing near to God. Hear again these words from verses one through three: *"Blessed is the one... whose delight is in the law of the LORD... That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season."* At the end of the Psalm, we are promised that *"the Lord watches over the righteous."* The aim of the Christian faith is to live a righteous and upright life. Perhaps you heard it earlier when I read Psalm 1. This Psalm also speaks of the other side. Just as we heard last week in James 3 of our tendency to speak out of both sides of our mouth, the psalmist also speaks of the dichotomy of being human.

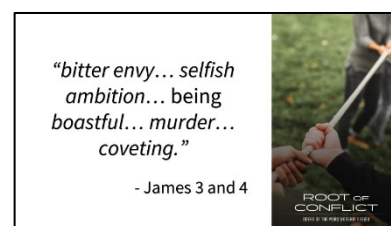


In verses four through six we are reminded that *"the wicked are like chaff that the wind blows away... the wicked will not stand in the judgment... the way of the wicked leads to destruction."* We read these words and think that we do not want to be that person. We want to be the tree, the one rooted in God's will and ways. We do not want to be the chaff, blown about by the ways of the world. But we are both. Theologian Angela Schaffner notes, "Our lives do not reflect a claim to live in one of these two realities but a challenge to embrace the tension of living a life that vacillates between the two." As we continue into our passages from James and Mark, we will explore this tension and the root of this conflict within us.





Turn with me to James 3 as we dive in this morning. In our passage today, we also see the dichotomy between those who follow the ways of God and those who follow the ways of the world. Using the language of Psalm 1, those who are blessed are, for James, those with wisdom and understanding. Those who were identified as wicked in the Psalm, James identifies as *"earthly, unspiritual, and devilish."* For both the psalmist and for James the source or determining factor comes down to our connection to God or to our connection to the things of the world. James gives us a list of the earthly things that we struggle with in verses fourteen and sixteen from chapter three and in verses one and two from chapter four. The list includes *"bitter envy... selfish ambition... being boastful... murder... coveting."* When we allow these to be the guiding forces in our lives, then we are like chaff, blown this way and that by the changing fads and hot topic issues of the day. These emotions can lead us to living in *"disorder and wickedness"* of every kind. Let's turn to Mark 9 to get a real-life, gospel example of these things being lived out.



Our gospel lesson begins today with Jesus again explaining what will happen to him at the end of his earthly ministry. Jesus will be betrayed, killed, and, afterwards, will rise on the third day. Mark shares that the disciples did not understand what Jesus was saying. That becomes evident as we turn to verses 33 and 34. Here Jesus asks what they had been talking about amongst themselves as they walked along the road. *"They were silent."* That is never a good sign, is it? Turns out the disciples had been arguing amongst themselves about who was the greatest. Let's see – envy, selfish ambition, being boastful.

Check, check, check. If allowed to continue the discussion on their own, maybe the argument would have risen to these other levels of wickedness and disorder. Of course, we know what it is to struggle with these things. These roots of conflict are present in all of our lives. Even us pastors. When we gather for meetings, we typically ask about how things are going in each other's churches and ministries. Although many will say that numbers do not matter, someone always asks how many we have in church on a typical Sunday. The number draws one of two responses from most people. Some say something about that being really good. Unless their number is higher. Then they gladly share how many they usually have in worship on Sundays. We can all struggle with envy and selfish ambition and boasting.

Next, we read that Jesus sat down. Isn't that what we do when we are at our wit's end? I can see Jesus sitting down, drawing a deep breath or two, and gently inviting the disciples to gather around. Jesus simply says to them, *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."* The two disciples that we would maybe think of as front runners for 'greatest disciple' both have their faults. It doesn't matter Peter that you are usually the first one to come up with the answer or are often the first one to act. Remember just a few days ago when I had to say to you, *"Satan, get behind me"*? Yes, John, you are known as the one I love. You'll falter at the arrest in the garden, and you'll pause at the empty tomb, afraid to go in, afraid of what you might see. It is hard to even envision wanting to be last. It is challenging to say we want to be a servant to all and to really, really mean it.



To illustrate what he means by this statement, Jesus gathers a small child in his arms. He tells the disciples that whoever welcomes one such as this in his name really welcomes not Jesus himself but welcomes God, the one who sent Jesus. Jesus is connecting back to the idea that we are all made in the image of God, that we are all beloved children of God.



Children have always held a special place in the heart of God. They are the vulnerable, the weak. Our God-given sense of community and belonging begins in the home. At home we learn what it is to be loved, valued, worthy. In our families we learn what it means to love well, to care for the one in need. Last week we saw a video and we heard why having a family, why having a place to belong, is so important in a child's life. This week we turn to some practical ways that we, both as the body of Christ and as individuals, can help to connect foster children with families and to support those actively participating in the foster care system. To share the different ways that you could be involved, please turn your attention to the screens.

[Play video: "Everybody Can Do Something"]



For many of us, fostering or adopting is not feasible. Maybe we are too old or too young. Maybe our housing or family situation doesn't work right now. Maybe we have other responsibilities. But for some, maybe fostering is a possibility. Maybe you were intrigued by the Wrap-Around possibilities. Maybe the Spirit whispered in your heart when you heard Teri talk about respite care. We can all do

something. As you consider the great needs in the foster care system in South Dakota, maybe some questions are rolling around in your mind. Maybe something is stirring in your heart. If you have questions or want to know more about something you've heard, please put your questions in this box. It will be out on the table in the entry area. Jot down what is on your heart or mind and we will ask the panel that will be here next Sunday. Thank you.

Returning to James 3, we wrap up the call to be aware of the roots of conflict so that we can live righteous and upright lives. We begin in verse seventeen. Here James reminds us that *"The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."* While we all know that true wisdom does come from God, we also all know that the human, fleshy side of us is drawn to the pleasures of this world. James writes of this in verse one: *"Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?"* These words could have been spoken to the disciples as they walked along the road arguing amongst themselves about who was the greatest: *"Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?"* The lures of the flesh are things that weigh us down, that are never satisfying, that are never enough. So, when living in this way, we crave and crave, we chase and chase. We occupy ourselves with filling that bottomless pit.

"The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality and hypocrisy."
- James 3:17





Or... Or... Or we can choose to step away from the roots of conflict. We can choose to pursue what James calls "*a harvest of righteousness sown in peace for those who make peace.*" We can make the choice to make peace,

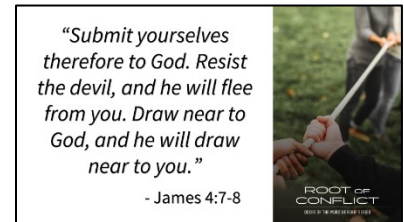
to sow peace. We can live into a peace that says I am not the center of the universe. We can have peace knowing that we are loved and valued. We understand this best when we love and value others about self. We can decide to cede the spotlight so that we can applaud the other. Living the way of peace, we can bind up and heal, pouring ourselves out into the lives of those we meet in the name of Christ.

James names these choices a harvest of righteousness. Do you remember how we defined righteousness in our last series? Righteousness was being faithful in our relationships – both with God and with one another. For James, this would be both the body of Christ living together in love and the church being love in the world. Righteousness is about living as though God were the determiner of who was worth loving and who wasn't. Peace is an outcome of love. When we learn to love like God, then we will make peace, we will sow peace. Sowing peace in the world counters the roots of conflict inherent in our humanity. Peace, as an outcome of love, comes when we bind up and heal brokenness and pain, when we pour ourselves out into others' lives, when we look within and take the time to do the hard work of rooting out those sources of conflict within ourselves.

To choose to live a life of peace, gentleness, mercy, and love, we must first surrender to God. As I noted earlier, being made into a disciple of Jesus Christ is a life-long process or cycle of surrender and transformation that happens over and over again. Again, the call to deny self and to take up our cross is a daily call. We close today with verses seven and eight:

"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." Submitting to God, walking the path

of surrender, is a conscious decision. It is accepting the fact that we are all works in progress.



It is knowing that we are surrounded by support and grace from God and from our brothers and sisters in Christ. It is committing to moving forward, to walking paths that draw us closer and closer to God and to one another. Walking this path will call us to die to those things within us that are roots of conflict within us. James names envy and selfish ambition, coveting and craving as sources of the conflict within us. To this list we could add pride and judging, guilt and shame, jealousy and anger, and much more. As we close, I ask, what is it inside of you that you need God to root out, that you need to let go of, that you need God to cleanse you of? Maybe it is one of these things that we named today. Maybe it is something else. The roots of conflict are many. When we submit ourselves to God, we begin this process. May we each submit ourselves to God, drawing near to God. Doing so, God will draw near to us, strengthening us for the journey ahead. May it be so. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you consider those things within that create conflict in your walk with Christ, what can you name that you need to surrender to God?
- 2) *Pray*. When or where in your life can you sense God drawing close to you? Seek the Lord in prayer, inviting God to draw even nearer.
- 3) *Study*. Read Mark 9:42-48. How does Jesus advise us to deal with those things that cause conflict within us? How, in a practical sense, would you “cut off” your hand or foot to keep from sinning?