

Conflict: What Is and Isn't – James 3:13-18

I'm going to be honest with you this morning. I am a boring person. I don't say that to try to garner sympathy and have people say, "No you're not" after the service. I have accepted it. Most nights I would prefer to hunker down with my Harry Truman biography and get lost in it.

I am boring, and yet, I really like to be around fun people. Over the years I've managed to develop friendships with people who have big personalities and are the life of the party. This was true in college and when we lived in Los Angeles.

I love the different types of people that God has created and occasionally a fun person needs a boring friend and I'm happy to fill that role.

But here's what can sometimes happen with different personalities. We can turn the uniqueness into a reason for annoyance and frustration and that can ultimately lead to conflict.

Last week we tried to give you the reasons behind conflict. There's a general reason and a personal reason. But we need to sort of circle back this morning and make sure we understand that every difference is not an occasion for conflict. Before we can do the work of handling conflict, we have to make sure we grasp it rightly.

Our culture has developed a knee jerk reaction to disagreement over the last few years of cancel culture, and I fear that this quietly creeps into our lives as believers and even into our personal relationships. If we see things differently, we dismiss or we fight and that doesn't always have to be the case. In fact, most of the time, it shouldn't be our response. So, I want to provide a little bit of guidance and understanding this morning to help us know what conflict is and what it isn't. We'll look at **2 Guides to Help You Identify and Handle Conflict**.

1. 3 Categories to Identify Conflict

Some of our trouble is that we don't have categories for something other than conflict. So, when we are different from another person or see things differently, we quickly fight for our own perspective, even when it's not a moral issue. I find it

helpful to break things down into parts and then build back toward the whole. So, here are three categories that may give you a better understanding of what is happening in your life.

- Difference

I've already mentioned personality differences, but those get to a much deeper reality. God has created the world full of differences and diversity, and this is good. You even see this in the Godhead. God is a Trinity and we have to affirm two things about the truth of the Trinity. God is one essence in three persons. Within God there is both unity and diversity. This is reflected in creation. God creates and fills the world with goodness, but the assortment is shocking. What variety. Heaven and Earth. Light and darkness. Sun and Moon. Land and sea.

And then you get to Genesis 2 and God creates the woman who is both like the man and unique. And Adam delights in her uniqueness. In Genesis 1-2 we have harmony and peace, but not flat and gray sameness. Difference is a gift from God and this is the most fundamental and basic level that you have to keep in mind and it is not a problem.

- Disagreement

With these differences, we are going to have disagreements. You and I are occasionally going to see things differently. Now, this is not an attempt to flatten every perspective out and say that any opinion is as good as another.

There are truths that accord with reality. There are perspectives that are right. The proper response to disagreement is not to just shrug your shoulders and say, well, I guess we can't really know for sure.

But disagreement is not bad. In fact, it's a gift from God at times as well. We all need each other. We need different personalities, gifts, perspectives, and life experiences. We need to work through disagreements, and it is possible to do this without hating one another.

We spent almost all of 2025 studying the book of Acts and some of you may remember the story of Paul and Barnabas going their separate ways in Acts 15:36-

41. Let me remind you of this. The text doesn't tell us who was right and who was wrong and there may not have been a right or wrong position. They disagreed, but neither were apparently so upset that they couldn't continue in ministry.

Disagreement will happen in regular church life too. Romans 14:1 makes it clear that we are all going to view certain activities differently. The main issue in Romans 14 is not who is right or wrong but more important things. Listen to Romans 14:17-19.

Difference and disagreement are gifts from God, but our sinfulness seizes on them and causes them to turn into conflict. *"Because of our sinfulness, we are often tempted to see otherness, or difference, as intrinsically bad."* – Kristin Silva

- Conflict

How do differences and disagreements turn into sinful conflict? First, when we focus on self and pridefully become the standard of right and wrong. Self-centeredness pushes disagreement past the breaking point to turn into a fight. Probably 10 plus years ago Bethany and I had quite an argument concerning how quickly we needed to get the leaves up in our yard in the fall. Disagreement? Yes. Did it need to turn into a sinful conflict? Absolutely not. It turned that way because we were each concerned with self and determined to get our own way. *Sin tempts us to discern the right or wrong of difference by self-centered standards...If a difference is only good if it aligns with my preferences and tastes, then I'm living in the warp of sin."* – Kristin Silva

Second, conflict happens when we make a simple matter of difference into a moral difference. This is very common in marriage. One spouse is laid back, one is more particular. Difference in personality, but when we start to assign a moral difference. "You are lazy" or "You are pestering" it turns a difference into a conflict.

Third, conflict happens when our differences and disagreements turn from desires to demands and begin to rule our hearts. This is the ultimate reason why God given differences turn into fighting and quarrels. It's what we talked about last week from James 4.

So, these are 3 categories to help you understand and identify what's going on. When you have an argument or disagreement, stop and try to assess what category it fits in. Is this simply a difference in personality, wiring, or experience? Is our disagreement based on different opinions? Or, has this moved across the line because of self-centeredness? Has my desire for comfort, security, pleasure, or power began to rule my heart and caused a fight? Those are the categories and now let's look at the second guide to begin to help us become the type of people who can handle conflict.

2. 3 Character Qualities to Handle Conflict

I intentionally call these character qualities, because these are the types of things that get built into your life before a disagreement. The time to hone your aim is not on the morning of the first day of hunting season. Let God's grace build these qualities into your life now, and they will subtly shape the way you see disagreement and respond to it.

- Discern the Good

I would describe this as a propensity toward construction rather than criticism. In other words, you are prone to see the good, and not always fixated on the negative. It's not a call to ignore wrong, but it is a way of life that is drawn toward the good. Why does this matter for conflict and disagreement?

Well, if our sin easily turns difference into fights and conflict, if we are constantly attuned to the negative differences or frustrations, we will regularly be engaged in conflict.

But this is not the lens Scripture gives us to operate with. Paul exhorts us over and over again to be thankful. To rejoice in God's goodness. And even the quality of discernment is not meant to highlight the negative, sinful, and bad. Listen to Romans 12:1-2. Discernment is ordered toward the good. People regularly use that word discernment when they are talking about knowing what's wrong with something. You do have to be able to see the problems and the wrongs, but you only pick up on the wrongs to promote the good and lean into the good.

Our disagreements and differences would turn into sinful conflict far less often if we put on a lens of thankfulness and encouragement. If we became grace sniffers, always eager to catch a whiff of God's grace in the life of my spouse, neighbor, co-worker or fellow church member.

- Gentleness

These last two qualities are both found in James 3:13-18, but let's read the whole passage briefly. It's the center of the book of James and the message of James is to teach us about heavenly wisdom that leads to wholeness in our lives and certainly wholeness in relationships. Notice the stark differences between earthly wisdom and the division and conflict it causes and heavenly wisdom and the peace and reconciliation it brings. At the center of heavenly wisdom lie these qualities of gentleness and being open to reason.

It's easy to think of gentleness as someone who is soft and gets run over, but that's not the case. This quality is spoken of as necessary for elders and notice in 1 Timothy 3:2-3 what it's in contrast to. To be gentle is to be considerate of others. The gentle person is able to see things from another person's perspective. They may not agree, but they can consider the other person. This leads to understanding and grace. But it's not just for elders. Listen to Titus 3:2. It's for all of us. And it's right beside another key quality in James 3.

- Open to Reason

Did you know the Bible actually describes a wise person as being open to reason? What does this mean? Easily convinced. Not looking to argue. Compliant and willing to yield. One commentator put it like this: *What is meant is not a weak, credulous gullibility, but a willing deference to others when unalterable theological or moral principles are not involved.* – Douglas Moo

A major part of being gentle and open to reason is being able to identify what is worth fighting over and what is not. It's being able to discern the good and triage the truth and then willing to yield in areas where you can.

So, let me close this morning by putting these categories together along with these qualities and trying to paint a picture of what relationships in the church could look like. What if we all were able to recognize differences with one another and celebrate them and rejoice in God's gift of variety? And then what if we were able to acknowledge disagreements and actually talk about them without getting mad and frustrated? What if we had people in the same church who like the current president and some who didn't and it was ok? What if we were gracious enough to discuss differences of opinion and not turn inward toward self and take offense? What if instead we listened, and were thankful, and tried to understand and encourage? What if we willingly yielded to the thoughts of another person without fighting when it was necessary? What if we thought of others as more important than ourselves?

Then we would be a group of people who could be open and honest, and ready to talk and change things, and adjust, and grow. Our differences and disagreements would become occasions for real change and not for fighting and quarrels. Then we would genuinely represent Christ to the world and be peacemakers and agents of reconciliation to those around us. That's the goal. Let's pray.

Sermon Reflection Question – 1/11/26

- What are some moments in your life where simple differences have turned into frustration and conflict?
- Explain cancel culture and how it can shape Christians to respond in unbiblical ways to differences.
- What are some examples of differences that you see in the Bible that are NOT sinful or wrong?
- What are some examples of disagreements that you see in the Bible that are not sinful or wrong?
- Would anyone be willing to explain a disagreement in your life that has turned into sinful conflict?
- What happens to turn difference and disagreement into conflict?
- How can we develop the three character qualities before we have disagreement and conflict?
- How can you cultivate a thankful heart that looks for the good? Give practical examples from daily life.

- Why do you think so many of us struggle with a critical or negative perspective?
- How would you describe gentleness?
- What are some issues/truths that we cannot simply agree to disagree over?

2 Guides to Help You Identify & Handle Conflict

James 3:13-18

1. 3 Categories to Identify Conflict
 - a. Difference
 - b. Disagreement
 - c. Conflict
2. 3 Character Qualities to Handle Conflict
 - a. Discern the Good
 - b. Gentleness
 - c. Open to Reason