

UNDERSTANDING CONTENTIONS – Proverbs 23:29-35

INTRODUCTION – Living in a densely populated city gives rise to short-tempered behaviours. Road rage and neighbourly fighting have become common phenomena in Singapore. Homes, schools and even churches are not spared from heated exchanges. However, as truly born-again believers, our behaviour and conduct must be many notches above that of the world.

This theme deals with this fiery issue. It is the issue of "contentions."

I. **Source of Contention – Proverbs 13:10, "Only by pride cometh contention: but with the well advised is wisdom."** [antithetical parallelism]

- a) The sinful heart filled with pride is the source of contentions. Pride is the root of arrogance and presumption. Get rid of pride, and there will be no contention. The word "contention" comes from a root meaning "to lay waste or to ruin." The contentious person goes out of his way to find trouble. He cannot be wrong. By all means possible and at his disposal, he will put the other down, regardless of the cost.
- b) The well-advised are the ones who take counsel. They are the ones who know the Word of God. They will listen to advice and are teachable. God calls them "wisdom." The well-advised are not just wise; they personify wisdom.

II. **Dealing with Contention –**

- a) Stop before it starts -- **Proverbs 17:14, "The beginning of strife is as when one letteth out water: therefore leave off contention, before it be meddled with."** [antithetical parallelism] -- In OT times, water was stored in tanks made of clay. If the tank has a crack, a little bit of water would flow out. If the crack is not repaired, the entire water tank could burst open, and all the water would be wasted. Water was a source of life in OT times, and thus very precious. The beginning of strife (i.e. "madon" – "brawling") is like a person who makes the water inside the tank gush out. The only way to stop strife is to "leave off contention", i.e. controversy (from the word "riyb"). To "leave off" means "to forsake or let something fall" "before it be meddled with", i.e. "before it roles or rushes forward." This means that once strife starts, it will keep going and may reach a point where it is too late to stop. Therefore, stop it before it starts. The crack in the tank is small - do not dig into it to enlarge it! Plug it immediately.
- b) Learn to settle -- **Proverbs 18:18, "The lot causeth contentions to cease, and parteth between the mighty."** [synthetical parallelism] – If there is a stalemate in any discussion, settle it by lot. Once the matter is settled, both parties will go their own way. The LORD initiated the lot to help Israel settle any matter. This means that the casting of lots in OT times was God's decision. In other words, let God decide. The "mighty" refers to men of power and influence. When they quarrel and fight, many will get hurt. Settle to prevent things from getting out of hand.
- c) Practise biblical separation -- **Proverbs 22:10, "Cast out the scorner, and contention shall go out; yea, strife and reproach shall cease."** [synthetical parallelism] – The best way to deal with contention is to get rid of contentious people. The Bible calls

them "the scorner". The word "scorner" refers to "a person who makes his mouth at you", i.e. talks arrogantly. To cast out the scorner literally means to drive him away. If he does not go willingly, literally push him out the door. Contention will leave with him. Strife (legal suit) and reproach (disgrace) shall cease or stop immediately (the word "cease" is "sabbath"). Do not make friends with scorners. They will ruin your life. They will in time bring disgrace into your life. These people will take you to court! Avoid them at all costs, and permanently throw them out of your lives. Watch out for such scorners.

- d) Avoid contention at all costs -- **Proverbs 21:19, "It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and an angry woman."** [antithetical parallelism] – The wilderness is not only a lonely place but a place of many dangers as well. There are scorpions, snakes, and other wild animals that can maim or kill a person living in the wilderness. Yet the Bible says that it is better to live in this environment than to live with a contentious (i.e. quarrelsome) and angry woman. Why is the woman singled out and not the man? It is because this is a sin that is more common in women, just as the sin of adultery is common in men. Of course, this does not mean that men do not sin by being contentious and angry, just as women can also sin by committing adultery. In a husband-and-wife relationship, this sin of contentiousness must be carefully and consciously avoided. The wife must refrain from this sin that she is prone to commit. She must pray for a quiet spirit, which is of great price in the sight of God (1Peter 3:4).
- e) Fruits of a contentious man -- **Proverbs 26:21, "As coals *are* to burning coals, and wood to fire; so *is* a contentious man to kindle strife."** [emblematic parallelism] – "Coals to burning coals" means that a hot piece of coal will cause other coals that are in contact with it to become hot. Likewise, wood to fire: when fresh wood comes into contact with burning wood, it will also catch fire. When a man of quiet disposition comes into contact with a contentious (quarrelsome) man, the latter will kindle strife (riyb), i.e. stir up contentions. These people are widespread today. Stay away from such people and avoid contact with them, and you will be well.
- f) Cannot be Hid -- **Proverbs 27:15-16, "A continual dropping in a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike. [emblematic parallelism] 16 Whosoever hideth her hideth the wind, and the ointment of his right hand, *which* bewrayeth *itself*."** [emblematic parallelism] – A very rainy day refers to rain that keeps on falling all day. A contentious (quarrelsome) woman is just like the continuous drops of falling rain. This characteristic belongs to the "old man". Such a person cannot be hidden as if. It is like trying to hide the wind, which is an impossible task. The quarrelsome woman cannot shut up. No man can shut her up. A man who holds ointment in his right hand, which makes his right hand very fragrant, cannot pretend that he is not holding anything. The fragrance of the ointment on his right hand cannot be hidden either. The fragrance will betray him. These are two emblems that teach the same truth: that it is impossible to keep such a woman hidden. A Christian woman ought not to be contentious. The Holy Spirit working in her heart can help her to control her tongue. Talk less and never nag.

III. Result of Contentions –

- a) A Ruined life -- **Proverbs 23:29-35**, "Who hath woe? who hath sorrow? who hath contentions? who hath babbling? who hath wounds without cause? who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine. Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder. Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things. Yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast. They have stricken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not: when shall I awake? I will seek it yet again." – The family of sins that drinking brings into the life of the drinker is frightening. It begins with woe (lamentations), which then leads to sorrow (a deep sense of sadness) and then contentions (quarrels). The problem gets worse, and others around him will bear the brunt of his foolishness. The more he drinks, the more his life will spiral out of control. The next sin that he will be prone to commit is sexual in nature. He will become numb to the depth of his sins. His folly is so blatantly obvious, and everyone around can see his wretched life except himself. He is numb to it and he keeps going back to it.
- a) From words to strokes -- **Proverbs 18:6**, "A fool's lips enter into contention, and his mouth calleth for strokes". [synthetical parallelism] – A foolish man speaks foolish words that are contentious in nature. He ruins lives by his words. If his contentious words are not stopped, they will lead to blows. Many have become violent. It begins with words meant to incite anger, and angry words lead to pushing, then to punching! This has happened many times, as we can read in the newspapers and on the internet. Believers must mind their words so that it will not get out of hand.
- b) From friendship to enemies -- **Proverbs 18:19**, "A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle." [synthetical parallelism] – Two brothers are on the best of terms, and that is why they are called brothers. They share the better part of their lives together. Then something disastrous happens, and one of them is offended by the other. The Bible says that it is easier to win over a city than to help two brothers mend their fractured relationship. Their contentions (quarrels) are like the bars of a castle (palace or citadel). The bars of a castle are unbreakable and are meant to keep out the enemies. To have one of them apologise first is extremely hard!

APPLICATION

Being contentious is a mark of an unbeliever. A believer who is not contentious must stay away from people who are, or else their contentious behaviour will rub off on him and he will become like them. The solution to not being a contentious person is to obey what our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ taught in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus taught that one of the fruits of the true believer is to forgive and to turn the other cheek. **Matthew 5:38-42**, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: **39** But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. **40** And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. **41** And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. **42** Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Are you a proud person? Do you think that pride dies when the sinner becomes a Christian? Do you consider a person who is soft-spoken and bows his head whenever he speaks to you to be a humble person? Do you consider a person who speaks loudly and looks you in the eye to be proud?
2. Have you been involved in a lawsuit before? Do you think that Singapore has become a litigious society? Should Christians take other Christians to court?
3. Are you a contentious person? Were you contentious before salvation? Have you come across a contentious person? How did you deal with him/her?
4. Do you know of any woman who is usually angry and contentious? How do you propose helping her? Is it possible for a Christian woman to be contentious and angry, whereby the men would rather stay in the wilderness?
5. Do you drink? Do you think it is good that the church requires all who teach the Word of God in any capacity to practise total abstinence?