

**“Quarreling”**  
**Proverbs 15:13-19**  
**June 14, 2009**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We’re looking today at the *little* sin of quarreling. As I was thinking about this topic this week, it occurred to me how similar quarreling is to physical fighting. For example, both quarreling and physical fighting start out small and escalate. I had two brothers close in age to me growing up, and my older brother and I often fought with our fists when we were younger. I could remember the fights long after I could remember how they started, because their origin was almost always something petty. Arguments start the same way, don’t they? That’s why the writer of Proverbs says, **“The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so quit before the quarrel breaks out”** (17:14). Picture the gates of a dam opening. Once the gates start to open, the force of the water helps in opening them further and makes it difficult to close them. In the same way, it is much easier to start a verbal fight than it is to stop one.

Another similarity between the two is that the goal is the same both in quarrels and in physical fighting. That goal is to be the last one standing. In the case of quarreling, the goal is to silence any who disagree with you. You want them to concede, and a concession means that they will be silent. Or to say it differently, you will have the last word.

Before we get into this topic, I need to make one clarification. The Bible in general and the book of Proverbs in particular, call us both *into* some conflicts and *out of* other conflicts. We are called into some fights that are necessary. Proverbs 27:6 speaks of one: **“Faithful are the wounds of a friend.”** To follow the path of wisdom will take us into more of these good kinds of conflicts and away from the proud kind of conflicts that wise people steer clear of. It is this bad type of conflict that our passage is speaking of, particularly in verse 18 – **“a hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention.”** Let’s consider the following three points concerning this quarreling spirit.

**I. The Origin of Quarreling**

According to verse 18, quarreling has its origin in anger. **“A hot-tempered man stirs up strife.”** So if we would solve the problem of quarreling, we need first to deal with the anger that lies at its heart. How should we go about doing so? Much advice on anger management is too pessimistic in that it speaks only of managing the beast of anger rather than questioning its right to live in our hearts. So the angry person is told to notice what types of circumstances

trigger his anger and avoid all situations that may lead to those circumstances. Or if he should get angry, he is told to leave the scene and go find something to beat on until his anger subsides. Obviously, it's better to beat on a pillow in your bedroom than to beat on another person, but this advice concedes more than is necessary. Suppose a nest of rattlesnakes has taken up residence inside your house, and you call a pest control company to take care of it. They come to your house for a consult, and sit down with you and talk to you about how to manage the snakes in your house. They point out that the snakes seem to be content to stay near the kitchen, so they advise you simply to stay away from your kitchen. "And just in case they do venture out from the kitchen," they add, "you may want to make sure your bedroom door is shut at night while you sleep." This pest control is conceding too much. You don't want rattlesnake management, but rattlesnake eradication.

We want to do more than manage our anger and its resulting quarreling. In order to do so, we need to begin to address our anger at a heart level. The larger context of this passage, which begins back in verse 13, reveals that anger has its source in an unbelieving response to difficult circumstances in our lives. Angry people view the key to the good life as that of making good their circumstances, while non-angry people have come to see that the key lies in trusting God for their circumstances. So we read in verse 13, **"A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed."** Have you ever noticed how the face can so clearly indicate the heart? When the heart is happy, the face comes alive. On the other hand, when the heart sinks into sorrow, the whole person falls into depression. In other words, this verse is saying that the heart, not circumstances, is decisive.

Verse 15 makes the same point in a different way. **"All the days of the afflicted are evil, but the cheerful of heart has a continual feast."** The contrast here is not between the cheerful and the afflicted, but between two groups of the afflicted. There is a class of the afflicted who have a cheerful heart, and it is to them like a continual feast. In a time when hunger and starvation were never far from peoples' minds, the idea of a continual feast is a powerfully positive image. And it was also a day when food preparation was lengthy and difficult. But here is a feast, with an abundance of food that someone else has prepared. As soon as there is a need, there is the provision. This promise is not for those with pleasant circumstances, but the afflicted. It is this promise of which the angry who end up quarreling have no knowledge.

Let me give an example of how this might work itself out in a marriage. Finances are one of the common causes of marital quarreling, and this quarreling is often centered around the fact that often one of the spouses is by nature a saver and the other a spender. Both tendencies have a good side and a bad side, and God often puts people together in marriage to balance one another out. The saver often needs to be challenged to spend a little more and not save so much, and the spender needs the opposite. It is when these

tendencies are expressed apart from dependence on God that marital fights break out. When he's not trusting God, the saver seeks to cope with life's challenges through the security of a healthy balance in his savings account. The spender, on the other hand, just wants to forget life's challenges through the immediate satisfaction of buying something new. In acting this way, neither is believing verse 13, that the heart, not one's circumstances, is definitive. On the contrary, one believes that the circumstance of a higher savings account balance is definitive, while the other believes that the circumstance of some new purchase is definitive. So when the spending spouse makes the purchase, the savings spouse feels his goal threatened and responds in anger. And if the savings spouse manages to put the spending spouse on a budget that is seen as overly austere, the spending spouse sees the goal as threatened and also responds with angry quarreling.

## II. The Results of Quarreling

The book of Proverbs mentions two results of quarreling. One of them, spoken of repeatedly throughout the book, is the transformation of one's home from God's intended purpose as a place of joyful refuge, to that of a place to be avoided. So we read in Proverbs 17:1, **"Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife."** And there is a whole series of proverbs that speak of the quarreling wife. **"A foolish son is ruin to his father, and a wife's quarreling is a continual dripping of rain"** (19:13). The image of this verse is that of a leaky roof, which is not just an annoyance, but also something that slowly destroys the house. So we read, **"It is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman"** (21:19). This verse is talking about the very common situation of people getting married with the happy expectation of marital bliss, imagining decades of delightful companionship. But then the home becomes a war zone of continual fights, and they come to regret the decision to marry this person in the first place, concluding that the loneliness of the hermit's life in the desert would be preferable to the constant bickerings of the marriage.

Some may object to these parables as examples of sexism, because they talk only about the quarrelsome wife and are silent about the angry, quarrelsome husband. But remember that Proverbs is a book of wisdom from a father to his son, so it is to be expected that it would talk about the quarrelsome wife that the son would be wise to avoid. But we would read it correctly to extend the application to the angry, quarrelsome husband, of which there is an abundance.

The second result of quarreling is a loss of contentment. The angry quarreler is always striving to change his circumstances, and growing angry at others who are seen to stand in the way of that goal. He lacks contentment because he has the wrong values. He values the change of circumstances he

thinks he ought to have instead of the things that could be his no matter the nature of his circumstances. The book of Proverbs has numerous “better than” statements that speak to this issue of values, and two of them lie within our passage. **“Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it. Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it”** (15:16-17). If you had to choose between these two scenarios, which would you prefer? In the first, a family is gathered in the kitchen of their very simple house, and in front of them is a meal consisting only of the vegetables that have been harvested from their garden. Their animals had to be sold in order to pay some other bills, and now there is nothing to eat but the simplest of food. But there is harmony between the family members, anchored in the fear of the Lord shared by them all. The second scenario features the realization of the very things that people often seek and over which they respond with angry frustration and quarreling when the desire for these things is not met. There is great treasure, a large, luxurious house with the finest food money can buy. There are servants here, so that the family need not be troubled with such trivial things as food preparation. But the family in this second scenario is troubled nonetheless. They are troubled by the anxieties associated with preserving their wealth and caring for their vast possessions. Their anxiety about these things has led to a distancing from the Lord. And they are troubled by their constant bickering with one another, the kind of fights characteristic of those who are used to getting their way. The choice of the wise is clear—choose contentment even if it is accompanied by poverty. It is the choice that results in peaceful relationships.

*New York Times* columnist Pico Iyer said in a recent column that he used to dream of having the kind of wealth where he could go to places like Burma, Morocco and El Salvador. When he became able to do that, he said that he “noticed that the people I met there, mired in difficulty and often warfare, seemed to have more energy and even optimism than the friends I’d grown up with in privileged, peaceful Santa Barbara, Calif., many of whom were on their fourth marriages and seeing a therapist every day. Though I knew that poverty certainly didn’t buy happiness, I wasn’t convinced that money did either.”

### **III. The Solution to Quarreling**

It is these two “better than” verses that tell us the solution to the kind of angry quarreling that results in such destruction. The solution is to make a priority of the fear of the Lord and the love for others that our passage says is better than great treasure. Anger and quarreling come from the unsuccessful striving for things like money and prestige. But it does not lie fully within our control to gain these things. A talented person can work hard and still not acquire these things. But there is something far more valuable that can be had for those who seek them—the fear of the Lord and love for others. The wise make it a priority to gain these things.

What does it mean to make the fear of the Lord and love for others a priority in our lives? Anything that is a priority in our lives will be reflected in the time we give to it. Since I don't see any bathrobes among us, I know that all of us have made it a priority to make ourselves presentable before coming to church this morning. You made sure you gave time to that activity. While making a priority of the fear of the Lord involves more than making time for it, it doesn't involve less than that. The leadership of this church has attempted to help answer this question by asking our church members to be involved in four communities in this church. We believe that this is what God asks of all who follow Christ. We want people to be involved in a worshiping community each week through attending the corporate worship services of the church. Second, we believe that all Christians should continue to grow in their knowledge of the Bible as part of a learning community. Third, Christians are to be involved in loving relationships with one another as part of a loving community. Finally, we are to serve Christ in specific ways as part of a serving community. We provide opportunities for these four communities in this church through four main programs. There is an opportunity to be part of a worshiping community through our corporate worship services every Sunday morning. A learning community opportunity is provided through the Sunday School program, a loving community opportunity through small groups and serving opportunities through various options to serve the Lord in accordance with your gifts.

Since the book of Proverbs is written from a father to his son, I think it worth asking the question of what your children are learning about proper priorities from your priorities as a parent. For example, how prominent is the priority of their biblical and theological training as compared to other activities? Does Sunday School figure as prominently in your schedule as youth sports, music lessons or academics?

### **CONCLUSION:**

So our passage teaches us that quarreling comes from anger, and anger comes from the unbelieving effort to control your circumstances rather than trust God and seek him. Our memory verses (Phil. 4:6-7) for this week and last summarize this well. They tell us not to be anxious about anything, but to pray with thanksgiving about everything. The promise then is that God's peace will guard our hearts. That's the way we begin our Christian lives, through not being anxious about our sin and the guilt we feel. When we are anxious, we try to deal with it ourselves. But the whole point of being a Christian is that we can't deal with it. So we ask God to do so, which he has done for us in Christ. And then we receive the promise of his peace. Quarreling and anger are removed as we make this the theme of our lives.