

PEACE INHIBITORS OR CONTRIBUTORS: CHRISTLIKE CHARACTER CHECKLIST PART VIII

James 3:13-18

"Who is wise and has understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't brag and deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where envy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every kind of evil. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without favoritism and hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace."

INTRODUCTION

Conflict, hostility, resentment, aggression; honest ways to often describe the natural state of affairs in human relationships. Peace, harmony, cooperation, conciliation; we like to think people usually react toward others like this, but do we really? Take relations between peoples or nations, for example. Since the beginning of recorded history, around 3,600 BC, the western world may have known just 300 years of peace; less than 6% of the time. Wars killed at least 108 million people in the 20th century alone. Estimates of the total number killed in wars throughout human history range from 150 million to 1 billion. Peace—harmonious cooperation—is pleasant to think about, whether harmony between people, nations, or between us and God. But oh how difficult it is to experience or maintain true peace! Russell Brownworth is a United Methodist pastor in Florida. His older and married daughter, Jennifer, passed along to her Dad a devotional prayer she wrote to help maintain peace in her marriage: "I pray for -Wisdom - to understand my man; Love - to forgive him; Patience - for his moods; Because, Lord if I pray for Strength, I'll beat him to death. Amen."

We conclude today our extended look at the Christlike character qualities James lists in our text. His goal, and God's goal, is to give God's people a template to help us know if our attitudes and actions are more in line with our Creator's giving, godly character or if they are more aligned with Satan's grasping, demonic character. Our two Outline points are Peace Inhibitors and Peace Contributors.

I. PEACE INHIBITORS

James identifies two major inhibitors of peace in **vs. 14**: "bitter envy and selfish ambition." "Bitter envy" is better understood as "bitter jealousy." It can refer to the desire to promote ourselves, which makes us jealous of sharing credit or attention with others. Or, it can refer to a preoccupation with the correctness of our opinions. Most of us dislike unsolicited advice, even from friends and family who have a track record of having our best interests at heart. We often misread such advice as a personal putdown.

Carolyn Arends is quite accomplished: singer, songwriter, author, speaker, Bible college and seminary professor, and homemaker to a husband and two kids. She once found a new laptop for half-price on eBay. Spencer, a close friend and musical colleague, cautioned "it seems too good to be true." Carolyn countered this seller had a perfect feedback rating of 100. His advice annoyed her. She sent the seller \$1300. In a short, sickening time, she learned she'd been victimized. A fraudster hacked another's eBay identity to get money for nonexistent items. She dreaded the thought of admitting her folly to Spencer. She didn't answer his phone calls and began avoiding him. She started to resent him; imagining his gloating. She asked herself, "Why did he have to be so judgmental? Why was I ever friends with that jerk?" Then a concert performance forced them to fly together. When he casually asked about the laptop, she finally confessed her folly. Instead of the criticism and reproof she expected, she writes, "a strange thing happened. The enemy I had turned him into evaporated. Spencer turned into Spencer again, my teasing but deeply empathetic buddy." She then felt even more foolhardy for allowing her shame to distort how she viewed her best friend.

Carolyn Arends suggests the guilt of sin affects how we view God; not just our fellow human beings. For Adam and Eve, basking in God's presence highlighted their day. Then their sin, their leap into "envy

and selfish ambition," made them dread God's presence. Had God changed? No; they had. Carolyn writes, "Ever since, we humans have been letting shame poison our understanding of God. He becomes an ogre, or a bookkeeper, or maybe just a disinterested, detached monarch." Yet, when we cast ourselves upon God's mercy in the name of our Savior, **Jesus Christ**, the brightness of the purity of God's Son gets in His eyes. He loses sight of our sin and a peaceful harmony is restored with our Heavenly Father. As **Romans 5:1** (TLB) assures us: "So now, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith in His promises, we can have real peace with Him because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us."

Here's an eternally true maxim: Doing things Satan's way divides us; doing things God's way unites us. "For where envy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every kind of evil" (**vs. 16**). "Selfish ambition" originally referred to anything we do solely for what *we* can get out of it. The more aggressively we seek to impose our will, our wants, our importance upon others, the more we undermine the possibility of genuine peace existing between us. There's a story of a Springfield, IL, neighbor of Abraham Lincoln being drawn to his door one day by the sound of crying children. He saw Lincoln passing by with his two sons, Bobby and Eddie, both of whom were crying lustily. When the neighbor asked what was the matter with the boys, Lincoln replied, "Just what is the matter with the whole world! I have three walnuts, and each boy wants two." The major "disorder" from which our world now suffers is the disruption that prideful self-seeking causes in our relationships—with God and with others—by overthrowing God's will.

I Corinthians 14:33 reminds us, "God is not a God of disorder but of peace." Throughout the Bible, "peace" refers more to experiencing "wholeness" or "completeness" than the mere absence of disturbance. Biblical "peace" describes positive prosperity, general well-being, contentment, and security. We're all familiar with the Golden Rule **Jesus** proclaimed in **Matthew 7:12**. The ERV puts it this way: "Do for others what you would want them to do for you. This is the meaning of the Law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets." A fascinating study on the Golden Rule's principle was conducted in 1985 by the Institute for Child Behavior Research. Each person was asked to list 10 people he or she knew best and to label them either as "happy" or "not happy." Then they were to go through the list again and label each one as "selfish" or "unselfish," using this definition of being "selfish": "a stable tendency to devote one's time and resources to one's own interests and welfare—an unwillingness to inconvenience one's self for others." Would it surprise you to learn all people labeled "happy" were also labeled "unselfish" by those who knew them best? The director of this study concluded, "The happiest people are those who help others." Those "whose activities are devoted to bringing themselves happiness . . . are far less likely to be happy than those whose efforts are devoted to making others happy." Thus, the director of this study concluded that to be truly happy, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

II. PEACE CONTRIBUTORS

James 3:18 presents the impact of aligning ourselves with God's will, His "wisdom from above." Just as James provides a description of Satanically-inspired wisdom (**v. 14**) and reveals its consequences (**v. 16**), he portrays the traits of God's wisdom (**v. 17**) and then describes its results for emphasis (**v. 18**). Let's reread our opening text: "Who is wise and has understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness.¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't brag and deny the truth.¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.¹⁶ For where envy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every kind of evil.¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without favoritism and hypocrisy.¹⁸ And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace."

Let's summarize the Christlike qualities named in **vs. 17**, the "peace contributors" God wants us to display in our very Satanically-disturbed world. "*Pure*" has a root meaning, "pure enough to approach the gods by external and internal obedience to their claims upon us." **Jesus** had this in mind in **Matthew 5:8** (NASB): "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." The more we live mainly to serve the Lord, as we

were created to do, others will see Christ more purely through us. "*Peace-loving*" translates the adjective form of "peace." We best follow the "Prince of Peace" (as Christ is called in **Isaiah 9:6**) when we base our conduct upon what secures peaceful relationships between others and with God. "*Compliant*" here means "easy to persuade." We are to be "teachable," "reasonable," and "approachable" in our dealings with others, rather than "being stubborn" and "close-minded." We embrace this character quality of our Savior when we become "skilled in knowing when wisely to yield" to the insights and wishes of others. Here is a transcript of a recent conversation between a Scottish pastor and his three-year-old grandson: "Help put away the toys, please." "No." "Come on, Aaron. Please help to put away the toys." "No." "Tell you what, you help put away the toys and you'll get a treat afterwards." "I'm tired." "You're stubborn." "No, I'm not stubborn." "Oh yes you are." "No. I'm not stubborn." "Do you know what stubborn means?" "No." "Stubborn is when you won't do what someone asks and you won't change your mind about it." "I am stubborn, then."

"*Gentle*" means "thoroughly reasonable" or "fair-minded." We are "gentle" followers of Christ if we place "reasonable" expectations upon how others should act; and when we favor fairness over faultfinding, even if the faults of others are real. We apply the same standards to the faults of others we want others to apply to us. "*Full of mercy and good fruits*" reminds us **Jesus** embodies God's merciful sympathy toward us that compels God to *act* upon His sorrow over our misery, regardless of our unworthiness. From the Church's earliest days, Christ's followers knew they must act to *improve* another's suffering. "*Without favoritism*" most literally means "not to be divided." We don't discriminate by dividing people into those we approve or disapprove based upon external factors, such as wealth, dress, or race. We shun being two-faced by the cunning deception of "guile" that seeks to fool others for personal advantage. And we are unwavering in our God-given commitments rather than being guilty of divided loyalties. "*Without hypocrisy*" literally means "without pretense." We admit our faults or immaturities and cooperate with the Lord to change us.

Can we seek to embody such Christlike qualities consistently and yet be very unChristlike? Yes, if we forget the admonition of **vs. 13**: "Who is wise and has understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness." It's a diabolical trap to seek to live pleasing to the Lord, and to urge others to live pleasing to the Lord, in a pushy, self-righteous way. How can we know if we are led by "envy" or "selfish ambition" in what we do as Christians, or by "wisdom's gentleness"? Do you recall the eternally true maxim: "Doing things Satan's way divides us; doing things God's way unites us"? If our actions divide people, stirring up strife rather than reconciliation, or hostility rather than cooperation, we need to closely examine our motives. We will never contribute to "the fruit of righteousness," we won't see "a harvest" of people who are getting right with the Lord, unless we live as peacemakers who make every concession to the viewpoints and needs of others short of compromising with sin. We may most resemble our Savior when we submit our wants and ambitions to the greater goal of drawing people into peaceful harmony with the Lord and with each other. **Jesus** taught us, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (**Matthew 5:9**, NASB). If we overturn God's order for our lives, how He designed us to live by Christ's character qualities, we become "peace inhibitors," rather than "peace contributors."

We often hear jokes of the unrest in our lives stirred up by the insensitivity of being self absorbed or driven by ungodly passions. A wife went to the police station with her next-door neighbor to report that her husband was missing. The policeman asked for a description. She said, "He's 35 years old, 6 foot 4, has dark eyes, dark wavy hair, an athletic build, weighs 185 pounds, is soft-spoken, and is good to the children." The next-door neighbor protested, "Your husband is 5 foot 4, chubby, bald, has a big mouth, and is mean to your children." The wife replied, "Yes, but who wants *him* back?" The burial service at one woman's graveside climaxed with a massive thunderclap, followed by a bolt of lightning accompanied by even more heart-stopping peals of thunder. When this intimidating display ended, her shaken husband whispered to the pastor, "she's there!" Such conflict, or lack of peaceful contentment, is funny when we're talking about other people, but do we really want to live like this? Can our Lord and Savior release anyone from the "envy and selfish ambition" behind the "disorder and every kind of evil" in our lives? Yes; yes; yes!

CONCLUSION

On a Wednesday evening, June 17, 2015, a young white man, 21-year-old Dylann Roof, visited a Bible study in the basement of the Emanuel A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal) Church of Charleston, SC. He received a warm welcome from the teacher, Myra Thompson. The pastor invited Roof to sit next to him. Someone placed a Bible in his hands. At 9:00 p.m., the teacher ended the study by standing with the others for a closing prayer. Suddenly, Dylann Roof pulled a Glock .45 from his fanny pack and began opening fire. He shot each church member multiple times while shouting racial slurs. Eight died immediately, including the Bible teacher and pastor. A ninth victim died soon afterwards. As Roof left the building, a church security camera captured his image with the gun still in his hand. Police located him the next morning, arrested him, and took him back to Charleston. When two FBI agents interrogated him, this young racist laughed, bragged about the murders, and declared he hoped he could trigger a race war.

On the night of the shooting, word of the church massacre quickly spread throughout the city, turning Charleston's streets into tangled mazes of screaming sirens, flashing lights, and panicked onlookers. When Myra's husband, Anthony, pastor of Charleston's Holy Trinity Reformed Episcopal Church, arrived home from his own Wednesday night program, a friend telephoned him with the shocking news. Anthony rushed to the church, discovered his wife, Myra, had been murdered, and fell to the pavement in tears.

On Friday, June 19, less than 48 hours later, Anthony Thompson reluctantly attended the courtroom bond hearing of Dylann Roof. A video camera from the detention center linked Roof to the courtroom. The judge invited the victims' families to speak directly to Roof through an audio connection. Anthony didn't intend to say anything but felt a strong urging from God to speak and trusted the Lord to give him the right words. "I forgive you," he told Dylann, "and my family forgives you. But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the One who matters the most, Jesus Christ, so that He can change it and change your attitude. And no matter what happens to you, then you'll be okay." Several other family members at the hearing also offered Dylann Roof their forgiveness with appeals for his salvation.

City and state police quite understandably braced themselves for the racial riots they expected to explode in Charleston, fearing the bloodshed, violence, and looting recently witnessed in Ferguson, MO, Baltimore, and other cities where their communities believed racially motivated crimes had occurred. But to the world's amazement, Charleston erupted not in violence, but in *grace*; enflamed passions were doused by waves of love and kindness. Charleston's mayor, Joseph Riley, witnessed firsthand the astonishing results of Biblical forgiveness extended to Dylann Roof. He stated, "A hateful person came to this community with some crazy idea he'd be able to divide us. But all he did was unite us and make us love each other even more."

The families of those Roof murdered extended the grace of forgiveness to him without any remorse in the heart of the murderer. To this day, while awaiting execution after being sentenced to death in 2017, he remains defiant and unrepentant. But, as Anthony Thompson states, "Scripture tells me that I am a sinner, forgiven by Christ, and saved by grace. Therefore, I am obliged to forgive others who hurt me." **Colossians 3:17** (NIV) guided Christ's followers among the wounded families: "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

Visible, Christlike acts of the families of those Roof murdered inspired the people of Charleston, SC. Compassionate donors pledged thousands of dollars to aid the victim's families. Blacks and whites gathered by the thousands in downtown Charleston for an evening vigil and prayer service; embracing, weeping together, and comforting one another. More than 15,000 people of all colors and faiths then joined hands to create a human bridge of peace, a chain of visible love that stretched for two miles and spanned one of the City's major physical bridges. "The wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without favoritism and hypocrisy."¹⁸ And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace."