



# Responding to Conflict

**Num 11:4-15; Ps 116:1-10; Mark 9:38-50; James 5:13-20**

Conflict is inevitable. What is not inevitable is how we respond to it. We may murmur or complain when things do not happen as we want them to. We may fight in secret, hiding in our cowardice. It may be that we take our concerns before God, knowing that only God is faithful to hear us and offer us redemption and restoration. It may be that we find healing in God and God's grace in desperate times—a renewed focus on the will of God. It may be that we fight to get our way, elevate our position, and place ourselves at advantage against the account of others. Our concern should be, how does God wants us to respond?

We have many options. Some flee conflict. Others attack. Still others seek perhaps subtler ways to manipulate others. In the text of Numbers, the Hebrews were complaining about God and about Moses. They did not come before God asking for anything. They were seeking neither help nor solutions. They simply came complaining about God and God's servant Moses. Their complaint was strong enough to change Moses' attitude. He also began to complain. They complained of little things that had no real importance. They did not lack food to eat. They were simply angry with the shape of God's provision. They wanted to take the reins and control the details of God's provision. They wanted to define how God should act. Life was not to their liking and they wanted to force God to do their will.

This was not a healthy way to act. It was, however, a very natural way of responding to the conflict at hand. They were not happy, so they complained about everything and about God. They would not submit their lives to God's will. They wanted to be in control. They wanted the authority to make demands, without accepting responsibility for their actions.

The psalmist takes another direction. He says he loves God for having heard his petitions. His life was mired in conflict, but he trusted God in the midst of his troubles. He kept his faith amid his grief, because he trusted in God's faithfulness. Perhaps all others were liars, but he resolved to trust God to be faithful. He was involved in conflict, threatened with death, but resolved to trust and plead instead of complaining. He recognized and trusted that God listened and took his concerns to heart.

James says something similar regarding the problems and conflicts of life. He says the appropriate response to conflict and suffering is prayer. When one is ill, one should seek God, asking other believers to join in praying. He says that in the midst of life's conflict and problems, we should seek God together, asking God's direction. He does not say all disease is the result of sin, but that conflicts should incite us to review our lives in light of God's will. He says the appropriate answer lies in prayer—seeking the presence and will of the Lord. The effects of prayer, he says, are redemptive, because God wants to restore us from our uncertain ways.

Jesus' disciples began their response to conflict differently. They wanted to crush those they saw as bringing conflict. They prevented those who did not follow their footsteps to minister in Jesus' name. They thought they were protecting Jesus and his reputation. Perhaps they were anxious to protect their own position. They came to tell Jesus of their deeds, certain of his applause. After all, the man had no right to claim Jesus' authority when he was not even a disciple. It was risky for someone who did not follow Jesus to use his authority in ministry. Jesus would have no control over actions in his name.

Jesus would have no way to correct errors. Some of the crowds who followed Jesus now might even leave. They arrived, happy to tell the good news of their faithfulness.

Jesus looked at them without the pleasure they so naturally expected. He said they had been wrong. He did not need protection. He did not worry about reputation or a great following. He was concerned with the mission of redeeming people to a relationship with God through the grace and love of the Father. His concern was service to God, not with control or group membership. The conflict the disciples saw was no more than fanciful and ignorant. They had created conflict where it did not exist.

Jesus directed their attention to the mission. It was the mission that mattered. Under the mission, the main thing was to focus on serving God and others out of concern to serve God's purposes. He said that offering water to another for being a follower of Christ is a fact worthy of compensation. Serving God involves serving others, without letting them stumble. Preventing another from fulfilling God's mission is to participate in opposing the mission and will that God has given us.

So Jesus says that we must focus on not preventing others who seek to serve God's purposes. To place an obstacle before one who serves God made us is no innocuous deed. It is a very important issue. In fact, Jesus says, it is an issue of sufficient weight that one should consider it a risk to one's own life. It is the creation of a conflict that should never exist. We should live in peace with each other, jointly following God's will.

Our deeds have positive importance when they work to give feet to the principles and mission God has given us. The conflicts we imagine between us are really conflicts between ourselves and God. That was the conflict between the Hebrews and Moses. That was the conflict between twelve and the one who did not walk with them. It is what James also suggests on saying we should pray for one another as we face conflicts and problems. The important thing, he says, is to walk again in the footsteps and mission of Jesus.

The people in the camp complained because of their distaste with God's provision. They wanted to be in control. They did not want to submit their lives to God. That was the main reason for their complaint. They were in conflict with God and God's purposes. Indeed, it is always so. If we would humble ourselves to God's will and purposes, there would be no more reason for conflict.

Conflicts between nations do not follow God's will. Conflicts in churches do not follow God's will. Conflicts between individuals do not follow God's will, either. In Jesus' words, even the religious conflicts which we claim are protecting God do not follow God's will. The appropriate response, he says, is bow to serve.

This is the answer God wants in the face of our conflict—that we raise our eyes above the conflict in search of how we might serve each other under the mission God has given us. By giving our lives completely to God's purposes, there is no more room to engage in quarrels, disagreements, and conflicts with one another. Are we ready to lay aside our conflicts to accept a greater dedication to the mission of Christ Jesus? It is the only worthy response to conflict, for it is the only way to respond to the real conflict. Will we serve God even when it goes against our personal tastes and preferences? How else could we respond faithfully?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*