Sermon to the Saints of God assembled at Topeka, KS: Sunday, November 22, 2026

A Contentious spirit – the church of God has no such custom!

1Corinthians 11:16 *"But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God."*

The English word "contentious" only appears five times in the Bible. "Philoneikos" is the Greek word translated as "contentious" in this verse; it is a compound word that makes very clear what this fleshly spirit is: "lover of strife". The contentious man lives for contention – strife – conflict; always churning a complaint or a cause in the heart. It is grievous and destructive sin to live in a contentious spirit, and it is the exact opposite of what the servants of God are supposed to be: lovers of peace! Today we will take a closer look at this plague of our sinful flesh. We'll start our analysis with some definitions.

Contend (verb)

- To strive or press hard against opposition. It is an action word. You contend when you put weight on a matter and will not let it go. The word itself is morally neutral. What makes it holy vs fleshly is what you strive for, and in what spirit.
- In the good sense: to labour, stand, and speak for a truth that is not yours to surrender. We are instructed to *"earnestly contend for the faith" (**Jude 3**)*.
- In a sinful sense: to push, wrangle, or fight in order to win, or have your way.

Contention (noun)

- Contention is the strife itself – the thing that happens - the clash that appears when two wills press against each other. It can be a necessary conflict over the faith, or a needless quarrel born of pride. Scripture almost always uses the noun in the second way: an altercation fed by self, resulting in division.
- In a good sense: the conflict that results from presenting and defending God's truth.
- primary biblical use: a fleshly quarrel characterized by verbal fighting.
    - ***Proverbs 13:10*** *"Only by pride cometh contention: but with the well advised is wisdom."*

Contentious (adjective)

- Having a spirit that loves strife and striving — ready to quarrel, hard to live with, quick to take up a fight.
- This word is never used in scripture to describe a holy zeal. It describes the regular disposition of a person who looks for a fight, keeps a fight alive, and kindles strife.

- ***Proverbs 26:20-22*** *"Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth. As coals are to burning coals, and wood to fire; so is a contentious man to kindle strife. The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly."*

In short:

- Contend is what you do.
- Contention is what you start or join.
- Contentious is what you are; the love of strife is alive and well in you. The word contentious is always sinful without exception in the scriptures; it is reserved for a quarrelsome spirit, never for holy zeal.

We will proceed with our analysis under the following headings:

- Zealously contending for the faith
- A Contentious spirit
- Mortifying the contentious spirit

Zealously contending for the faith

There is an appropriate reason to contend in this life, namely, we are commanded to earnestly contend for the faith.

- ***Jude 3*** *"Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should* ***earnestly contend for the faith*** *which was once delivered unto the saints."*
- ***Philippians 1:27*** *"Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit,* ***with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel****."*
- ***Proverbs 28:4*** *"They that forsake the law praise the wicked:* ***but such as keep the law contend with them."***

Gill: *"the division the Gospel made, as through the corruption of nature it makes wherever it comes, between the nearest relations and friends, some being for it, and others against it; or this may be expressive of the zeal with which the apostles preached, who earnestly contended for it, as persons in a combat or agony; they fought the good fight of faith valiantly, they endured hardness as good soldiers of Christ, and gave not way to the enemy, no, not for an hour: and all this was "in our God"; or "by the confidence" of our God, as the Syriac version renders it; trusting in him and relying upon him, being assisted by his grace, and strengthened by his power, and receiving much encouragement from a view of him as a covenant God; faith in God as a covenant God, will make a man bold in his cause"*

We are to contend for the faith – diligently, patiently, and as good, enduring soldiers. The contending has to be driven to an actual purpose that glorifies God. We contend in our own heart, in our prayer, with our words, by our behavior / example, etc. We are to contend by the word and strength of our God, and for His glory alone. Not to be right. Not to win an argument. Not to build ourselves up. Not to build a personal following. Not to give outlet to our malice and desire to be superior. These are examples of the flesh seeking its own. Rather we contend to glorify God, to be obedient servants, and in hope for the souls of men. Meekness and desire for peace should drive us, even when – nay, especially when - we are contending.

- ***Jude 9*** *"Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee."*
- ***1 Peter 3:15*** *"But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.*

Meekness is not weakness; it is not milquetoast and mealy mouthed. Rather, meekness rejects any thought of human strength, righteousness, glory, and vengeance, while resting fully in the power of God and His word, and taking actions that are necessary to be good ambassadors for Him. Contending in this manner is an act of faith. Consider just a few examples:

Moses repeatedly withstood, defied, and demanded of Pharaoh, "Let my people go"; Phinehas rose with a javelin and stayed the plague; Joshua and Caleb stood alone against the ten spies and the whole congregation; Samuel solemnly confronted and rejected Saul for his partial obedience; Young David took up the fight with the defiant Philistine giant; Nathan declared to David, "Thou art the man"; Elijah withstood, challenged, and mocked the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel; Nehemiah confronted and rebuked the rulers for forsaking the house of God; Daniel refused the king's meat and later faced the lions' den rather than cease praying; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego openly defied Nebuchadnezzar and chose the furnace; John the Baptist publicly condemned Herod's unlawful marriage; Jesus drove out the money-changers and pronounced woes on the Pharisees; Peter and John boldly defied the council; Stephen charged the Sanhedrin with resisting the Holy Ghost; the apostles, after being beaten, went out rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer for Christ; Paul withstood Peter to his face at Antioch; Paul reasoned, disputed, and declared Christ before Felix, Festus, Agrippa, and the Areopagus; Michael contended with the devil yet refused to bring a railing accusation.

These are heartening examples of our co-elect contending for the faith. And yet we also have many examples of the servants of God contending with each other in service of proud flesh. Consider:

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses out of envy; The disciples disputed among themselves over who would be greatest; James and John demanded fire from heaven on a Samaritan village; Paul and Barnabas fell into sharp contention and parted ways over Mark; the Corinthians divided into factions and quarreled in favor of their own pet doctrines and perceived leaders; Diotrephes loved the preeminence, prated maliciously, and cast brethren out; Euodias and Syntyche labored for the Gospel, but strove with each other.

It's easy for the servants of God to excuse our contentious flesh by rebranding it as zeal or a righteous cause. Beware!! It is dangerous and damaging business to give license to our anger and malice; more so when we clothe it in faux righteousness, as though we do God service with our sin. We must examine ourselves, beloved, seeking the Lord to cleanse our hearts and help us to separate the precious from the vile.

A contentious spirit

Contentiousness is the way of the flesh. It only exists because of the rebellion of man against God. Humans have contention with God, and strive against him from their birth; contention with other men grows and compounds as the natural man is hardened in sin throughout life. The contentions of some people are more constant and obvious, but this spirit is universal to the flesh. It is a work of the flesh, and the recompense for it is certain.

- ***Galatians 5:19–21*** *"Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath,* ***strife,*** *seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God."*
- ***Romans 2:8*** *"But unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath."*
- ***Philippians 1:15–17*** *"Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will: The one preach Christ of* ***contention****, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds: But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel."*
- ***Proverbs 18:6 "****A fool's lips enter into contention, and his mouth calleth for strokes."*
- ***Proverbs 29:22*** *"An angry man stirreth up strife, and a furious man aboundeth in transgression."*

- ***Proverbs 17:19*** *"He loveth transgression that loveth strife: and he that exalteth his gate seeketh destruction."*

The Bible identifies major drivers of contention, clustered around a few consistent themes:

- **Pride** – "*I am something*"
  - ***Proverbs 13:10*** *"Only by pride cometh contention: but with the well advised is wisdom."*
  - ***Proverbs 28:25*** *"He that is of a proud heart stirreth up strife: but he that putteth his trust in the LORD shall be made fat."*
  - Pride makes a person insist on being right, elevated, or uncorrected. Pride is an insatiable, contention fueled beast, whose appetite grows with each conflict. The more right a person believes they are, the more willing they are to engage in conflict to prove it.
- **Selfish desires and lusts that war within** – "*I want something"*
  - ***James 4:1*** *"From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?"*
  - Contention is often the outward expression of unsatisfied internal desire for some thing, or some status.
- **Envy and jealousy** – "*I want what YOU have*"
  - ***James 3:14–16*** *"14 But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. 15 This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. 16 For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work."*
  - Envy turns God appointed differences in circumstance into bitterness and rivalry.
- **Anger and a wrathful spirit** – "*I have a cause*"
  - ***Proverbs 15:18*** *"A wrathful man stirreth up strife: but he that is slow to anger appeaseth strife."*
  - Anger often starts contention, but worse, anger is a self-sustaining engine of contention. Once anger begins, it is a runaway train that the flesh cannot control while it recklessly destroys everything in its path.
- **Foolish questions and strife of words** – "*I is smart*"
  - ***2 Timothy 2:23*** *"But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes."*
  - ***1 Timothy 6:4*** *"He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings."*
  - ***Titus 3:9*** *"Avoid "foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain."*

  - These are debates that serve ego or speculation rather than truth or edification. The very process of such foolish discussion generates prideful contention, and often produces alignment to groups and ideologies that people cleave to, and identify with.
- **Hatred and a scorning spirit** – "I'm better than you"
  - ***Proverbs 10:12*** *"Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins."*
  - ***Proverbs 22:10*** *"Cast out the scorner, and contention shall go out; yea, strife and reproach shall cease."*
  - A scorner or talebearer quietly creates the fires of conflict that burn deep within the hearts of men, and then keeps them fueled with every fresh whisper.

Mortifying the contentious spirit

There is no middle ground with a contentious spirit. If that is the spirit driving you, then it is sin. Where you find contention between men, this sinful spirit is driving it. Contention that arises from true and proper zeal for God is the extreme minority, even among God's people. The reality is this: the primary contention and striving that we should be involved in is the bloody war inside of us – striving against sin. Daily. Continually. Our duty is to mortify it every time that it arises. Make it dead.

It is a particular distinguishing mark of a Christian and a Christian church, that we contend against our flesh such that we are driven by the love and pursuit of peace, and not the love and pursuit of strife. Our striving must be lawful, which is to say that it is for God's glory, his kingdom, and our faith driven desire to be present there when this pilgrimage is done.

2Timothy 2:1-7 *"1 Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2 And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also. 3 Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. 4 No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier. 5* ***And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully.*** *6 The husbandman that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruits. 7 Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things."*

The scriptures provide us with clear remedies for the contentious spirit. Here is a sampling:

- ***Proverbs 26:17*** *"He that passeth by, and meddleth with strife belonging not to him, is like one that taketh a dog by the ears."*

- ***Proverbs 17:14*** *"The beginning of strife is as when one letteth out water: therefore leave off contention, before it be meddled with."*
- ***James 4:6*** *"God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble."*
- ***Proverbs 20:3*** *"It is an honour for a man to cease from strife: but every fool will be meddling."*
- ***Proverbs 22:10*** *"Cast out the scorner, and contention shall go out; yea, strife and reproach shall cease."*
- ***Proverbs 26:20,21*** *"Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth. As coals are to burning coals, and wood to fire; so is a contentious man to kindle strife."*
- ***Proverbs 3:30*** *"Strive not with a man without cause, if he have done thee no harm."*
- ***Titus 3:9*** *"But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain."*
- ***2 Timothy 2:23,24*** *"But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes. And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient."*
- ***Philippians 2:3,14*** *"Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. … Do all things without murmurings and disputings."*
- ***Romans 14:1*** *"Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations."*
- ***Proverbs 15:1,18*** *"A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger. … A wrathful man stirreth up strife: but he that is slow to anger appeaseth strife."*
- ***Proverbs 10:12*** *"Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins."*
- ***Proverbs 25:23*** *"The north wind driveth away rain: so doth an angry countenance a backbiting tongue."*

Side note: There is a particularly troublesome and poisonous contention – when brothers and sisters in Christ contend with one another. "*A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle." (**Proverbs 18:19**)* My friends, there is only one answer once we have gotten twisted into knots of deadly contention with our brethren: cut the knots. Flee together to Christ for refuge. Forebear, forgive, walk in mercy and love. There is NO WAY to untangle our various contentions when we decide to litigate them. Leave off contention! Violently reject it. Walk in peace, submitting yourselves to each other, in mutual love for our King.

2Corinthians 10:3-6 *"3 For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: 4 (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) 5 Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against*

*the knowledge of God, and **bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ**; 6 And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled."*

Bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. This is a very practical instruction, and we have to treat it that way. We are His. ***He owns us***! We are to walk according to His standard. We are emotion driven, sinful creatures. When emotions rise up, we have to examine them honestly, compare them to the standard of our Lord, and then deal with them accordingly. That goes for the movement of every emotion that passes through us. With angry contention specifically, ask yourself: who is served by this contention, and how are they served? If it's pure flesh, then kill it! If it has a component of zeal for God, then first: kill the part that is flesh – it is useless and self serving. Compare the rest against your scriptural duty. If it is conflict with your own sin, then grapple with it – seek repentance from God. If it is conflict with your co-elect, then put on meekness, and look for the action that will be truly beneficial to their soul. Consider them in love, and in detail – how can I most effectively provoke them to love and good works? Then do it; in faith and in selfless love. If your anger and contention are driven by the vexation of sin and the world: again, put on meekness, and get about the business of serving our King's interest. If there's something useful and God honoring to do, then do it. Pray. Preach the word with hope for the souls of your neighbors, and confidence in the promised reward.

Again, the question you should be asking yourself early and often: who is served by my anger, my contention, and the actions that are flowing from it? Who is helped? Who is honored? Who is glorified? The honest answer to that question must dictate your spirit, and your actions. "I'm a truth teller" is not sufficient. To what purpose, and for whose glory?

1Corinthians 9:19-27 *"19 For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. 20 And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; 21 To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. 22 To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. 23 And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you. 24 Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. 25 And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. 26 I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: 27 But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway."*

I'll leave you with the tale of two women.

The first woman is the contentious woman. She is selfish - her behavior is driven by her own desire. She is discontent and full of contentions. Her ways are destructive to her husband, her children, and everyone around her.

- ***Proverbs 21:19*** *"It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and an angry woman."*
- ***Proverbs 27:15*** *"A continual dropping in a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike."*
- ***Proverbs 25:24*** *"24 It is better to dwell in the corner of the housetop, than with a brawling woman and in a wide house."*
- ***Proverbs 19:13*** *"A foolish son is the calamity of his father: and the contentions of a wife are a continual dropping."*

The second woman is the nursing mother. She selflessly cherishes her child, such that she literally pours her life and strength into the child. She is motivated by love and a sincere desire for the good of the child. Her actions are diligent and carefully designed to accomplish her goal. Her ways are full of life.

1Thessalonians 2:7-12 *"7 But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children: 8 So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us. 9 For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: for labouring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God. 10 Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and justly and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you that believe: 11 As ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father doth his children, 12 That ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory."*

This second woman is the nature of the Proverbs 31 woman – the Bride of Christ. The church is not about self-interest, she is about the glory of Her husband, and the good of her children. She lovingly pours herself into them, even when they misuse her. These two women are polar opposites. We must mortify the contentious woman that rises up in us, and leave off her deadly ways. Leave off contention. Pray God that we be found as faithful, selfless, nursing mothers who cherish their children.

I love you all. Amen.