

Contending Without Striving

How do you contend without striving? The Bible is filled with truths that seem to be in contrast, and it always seems to be a struggle to gain Biblical balance. Layton Talbert put it this way:

“We serve a precise God. Virtually every major biblical doctrine demands knife-edge precision as we work our way back and forth balanced on the tightwire stretched between two unambiguous and equally valid poles of truth. One footfall too far, one step—however reasonable—beyond the biblical data in either direction, topples one toward heresy.”

One of these areas is the seemingly difficult topic of contending for the faith while being commanded not to strive or quarrel. How do we find balance? Let’s look at some of the Scriptures to begin with just to see the tension.

Let’s see Scriptures urging us to contend

Jude 1:3: “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.”

This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightest war a good warfare; (1Ti 1:18)

2Ti 4:7 “I have fought a good fight, I have finished *my* course, I have kept the faith:”

Tit 1:13: “This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith;”

Luke 17:3 Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him.

Jud 1:9 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.

Verses that command us not to fight:

Joh 18:36 “Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.”

I Tim 3:3 Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous;

2Ti 2:24 And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all *men*, apt to teach, patient,

Pro 17:14 The beginning of strife *is as* when one letteth out water: therefore leave off contention, before it be meddled with.

Pro 20:3 *It is* an honour for a man to cease from strife: but every fool will be meddling.

So how do we reconcile these two ideas? How can we on the one hand – war a good warfare, contend for the faith, fight the good fight, while at the same time, leaving off contention, not striving, not brawling in any way?

Well, let’s answer that in two ways.

First let’s look at what the Bible means by the kind of striving it forbids and what it means by the striving it commands.

Second, let's look at the example of Jesus Christ.

So, firstly, some definitions:

What does the Bible mean when it says – don't strive- leave off contention? In 2 Tim 2:24, the word strive means to quarrel, to dispute. It is the same word used in James 4:2: "Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not." "fight" is the same word there. It seems to mean a quarrel – angry, selfish conflict. This kind of strife is condemned in Scripture as a work of the flesh.

Rom 13:13 Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying.

1Co 3:3 For ye are yet carnal: for whereas *there is* among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?

Gal 5:20 Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies,

Phi 2:3 *Let nothing be done* through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.

Jam 3:16 For where envying and strife *is*, there *is* confusion and every evil work.

The above verses already give us a clue to what kind the Bible forbids. The kind of striving or contending is the kind that is factious. It is born of pride, in a desire to exalt self. (Phil 2:3). It is an immature man-centred focus (1 Cor 3:3). It comes from not being controlled by the Spirit. It's a restless, loud spirit, that wants controversy, instead of peace. It wants conflict rather than quietness. And even if it doesn't desire it, it is quick to engage in it.

Now what then is the right kind of contending or fighting or striving?

The word in Jude – 'earnestly contend' means to struggle heartily. It is used similarly by Jesus in Luk 13:24 Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able." This is the same word used by Paul when he said "I have fought a good fight" and when he said "fight the good fight of faith". It's the word used in Colossians 1:29 : "Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily." It's the word Jesus used in John 18 – it also means to fight, to struggle, to go to war for. But it doesn't seem to carry the same idea of being quarrelsome, factitious, proud and cruel. It is used more or less positively – a struggle.

It seems that the difference is really in what you fight for, why and how. Ungodly striving is striving over things that God forbids like personal power, position, and for the wrong reasons – out of envy, and pride and a desire to be seen as better, or acknowledged as more intelligent or whatever the case may be. It's done without meekness or consideration. The right kind of striving strives for things of an eternal nature, for the sake of the Lord. Paul says in 2 Tim 2:4: "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."

It's done with firmness, but with meekness.

I think what will make it clearer is to look at the Lord Jesus.

“Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched *it* forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other. Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him. But when Jesus knew *it*, he withdrew himself from thence: and great multitudes followed him, and he healed them all; And charged them that they should not make him known: That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Behold my servant, whom I have chosen; my beloved, in whom my soul is well pleased: I will put my spirit upon him, and he shall shew judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory.

(Mat 12:13-20)

Notice the context. The Pharisees accuse Him of violating the Sabbath. The Pharisees now take counsel to destroy Him. Is His response to break out in an argument with them? No, He withdraws Himself. Matthew then comments that this withdrawing was a fulfillment of Isaiah prophecy that Messiah will not strive – He will not be quarrelsome – His Spirit will be meek and gentle.

So Jesus, who could not sin, did not enter into a fleshly, quarrelsome kind of striving.

However – there were time when we see the right kind of striving in our Lord.

And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, (Mat 21:12)

Ye serpents, *ye* generation of vipers, how can *ye* escape the damnation of hell?

(Mat 23:33)

So we see Jesus who was not quarrelsome, choosing to come face to face with his opponents and strive with them. Again, I think we can learn some lessons here about ungodly striving and godly striving.

First, Jesus was gentle. Gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit. However, our problem is we think the opposite of gentleness is firmness. But it is not. The opposite of gentleness would be cruelty – a work of the flesh. Firmness is the ability to give a firm rebuke when necessary – to be direct, to answer the opponent. Firmness is completely compatible with gentleness. In fact, our firmness is to have gentleness. This is exactly what Paul commanded Timothy: “And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all *men*, apt to teach, patient, In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; And *that* they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will. (2Ti 2:24-26). The very gentleness Paul commanded he applied in light of a rebuke. Some will need a rebuke. But this kind of striving is to be done with meekness. This is what Jesus was – power under control. He often simply chose not to respond to those who mocked Him or criticized Him. When necessary, He engaged in lengthy debates with the Jews. He was gentle, and firm. I suppose the other problem we have is thinking that gentleness is to be soft or weak. One thinks of gentleness as meaning the person who is gentle is delicate. Too often Jesus is portrayed that way – an effeminate man. This comes from our wrong view of biblical gentleness. Gentleness in Scripture really refers to being mild, temperate. It means that one is not given to bursts of temper or anger, flare-ups, outbursts. Gentleness has a sense of kindness to the object concerned. It is moderate, and self-controlled. Gentleness is really the restrainer on your righteous anger.

Gentleness will moderate your righteous indignation at sin – to be completely firm and resolved without being cruel and harsh. Phil Schaff put it this way: “His zeal never degenerated into passion, nor His ... nor His benevolence into weakness, nor His tenderness into sentimentality. ...He combined child-like innocency with manly strength, absorbing devotion to God with untiring interest in the welfare of man, tender love to the sinner with uncompromising severity against sin, commanding dignity with winning humility, fearless courage with wise caution, unyielding firmness with sweet gentleness!”

So, we see a Biblical balance. Let’ now get some guidance as to how to contend without being contentious.

1) Be Focused On What Matters

The Bible is just as clear about what not to fight about as it is about what we should fight about.

I Tim 1:4: “Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: *so do*.”

If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, *even* the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings,
(1Ti 6:3-4)

1Ti 6:20 “O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane *and* vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called:”

2 Tim 2:14: “Of these things put *them* in remembrance, charging *them* before the Lord that they strive not about words to no profit, *but* to the subverting of the hearers.”

Tis 3:9: “But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain.”

Notice that Paul tells Timothy to avoid certain debates. He says Timothy is to avoid striving over words. The Word of God is again amazing – because so many of the foolish controversies in the church, even in recent years – have been strife over words. E.g ‘the blood’, ‘Lordship’ ‘Calvinism’. Huge issues come of striving over words. Now this does not mean we must abandon verbal inspiration. It means we are not to worship words, and forget the truth. Don’t strain out a gnat and swallow a camel. The Pharisees were verbal inspirationists. They were hyper-literal. But Jesus had to say to them – go and learn what it means – “I will have mercy and not sacrifice”. They were what Tozer called ‘textualists’ – believing they could see all that was in a text, but lacking the humility to receive illumination from the Holy Spirit – they missed the whole point. Paul also tells Timothy to avoid fables and endless genealogies. Fables has the idea of unfinished story – a myth. A story which will never really die – because no one really knows. Avoid endless genealogies. The idea here is avoid things that cannot be answered. Avoid those issues which are either on the other side of the secret things which belong

unto the Lord, or which border on fiction. To spend too long on things which cannot be solved will cause strife. Don't bother striving over what we don't know.

He also tells Timothy to avoid profane and vain babbling. Vain babbling refers to fruitless discussions. The servant of God must know how to pick his or her battles. We are to give an answer to every man for the hope that lies within us. But we are also to avoid fruitless debates over words, over things which cannot be proven, over foolish opposition that can not really be answered.

Proverbs 26:4-5 carries this idea when it says:

“Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit.”

Pick your battles. That leads us into our second point:

2) Be Familiar With The Cause and the Enemy

What must we fight for? The fight is a fight for and a fight against.

What must we fight for? Paul tells Timothy “Fight the Good fight of faith”. I believe he is telling Timothy to actually fight for his own faith – keep on going. Don't give in to doubt. Obviously here the enemy is Satan, the world and our own flesh. We fight against them with the whole armour of God.

Jude tells us to earnestly contend for the faith once delivered unto the saints. So I fight not only for my faith – but for the faith of others. We must contend for the fundamental body of doctrine. The essential heart of the Gospel. We must fight for its integrity. We must fight for souls to be saved through it. And logically then, it is a fight against the true opponents of the Gospel. Who are they? Paul says in Ephesians 6:12: “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high *places*.” The real enemy is spiritual. People are just captives, deceived pawns of wicked fallen angels. “And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all *men*, apt to teach, patient, In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; And *that* they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.” The correct kind of striving is a striving for the truth to rescue people out of the bondage of error. (2Ti 2:24-26)

Now let's add this. Sometimes people are used by the devil to oppose the faith. As such – we must deal with people firmly as the need arises. Paul said of the Jews that were persecuting the Gentiles : “Rom 11:28 As concerning the gospel, *they are* enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, *they are* beloved for the fathers' sakes.”

Phi 3:18 (For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* the enemies of the cross of Christ:” But they are not the true enemy. For example, the Pharisees were certainly Jesus adversaries on earth. They were used by Satan to oppose the Son of God. And Jesus opposed them.

Jesus fought against the Pharisees because they had corrupted the heart of the Gospel. He publicly denounced their doctrine and authority, so that the people who were in fear and bondage to the Pharisees could see what was true. But He also wept over them in Matthew 23. People are captives. We are not fighting against people. We are fighting

against error, against demonic forces. We fight against unbelief, and its causes. We do not fight unbelievers

Part of the problem is we think people are the problem. Now certainly error must be confronted. That's why Paul commanded Titus to rebuke the false teachers sharply, while at the same time saying in 3:2: "To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, *but* gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men." People who are promoting error must be firmly confronted. The whole book of Jude is about identifying the false teachers, and confronting their false doctrine. But here is the interesting thing. Jude uses very strong language for these false teachers throughout his epistle – but listen to how he ends it –

"And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling *them* out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.
(Jud 1:22-23)

Jude is saying "see them as a desperate rescue attempt" Jude still says – seek to rescue them. They are not the ultimate enemy. Keep their soul in mind.

The real adversary is the devil and his world system, and his inroad into your own soul – the flesh. The real cause is the faith – my own and that of others.

3) Be Filled with the Spirit.

The kind of balance we need here can really only come from God. How do we know how to pick our battles? Isaiah 11:2 calls Him the Spirit of wisdom. When we turn to Him in humility, James tells us He gives who gives wisdom generously to all without reproach. He can give us the sense of balance and discernment.

How do we fight for faith? Eph 3:16 prays we be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being. The Spirit can give all the power. Paul said – I strive, I fight, according to His power which works in me mightily. How do I fight without becoming contentious, filled with bitterness and anger and malice? Galatians 5:22-23 tells us the fruit of the Spirit is "is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" Where do I get the ability to face the enemies of God with courage? 2 Tim 1:7 tells us "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."

We cannot begin to face a spiritual battle apart from the Spirit of God.

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;)

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;
(2Co 10:3-5)

As soon as you remove the Spirit of God – even the right battle over the right things – becomes a fleshly war of personalities. The Spirit glorifies Christ, and when that is controlling us, we will move avoid or end conflicts that are not working toward that goal. Let's just add something about time. Proverbs tells us the beginning of contention is as when one letteth out water. In other words, conflict grows with time. Paul tells us in "Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil."

(Eph 4:26-27)

Prolonging conflict gives Satan an avenue. Instead, we need to use wisdom as to when to press a point, and when to leave it. Proverbs 30:33: “Surely the churning of milk bringeth forth butter, and the wringing of the nose bringeth forth blood: so the forcing of wrath bringeth forth strife.” Don’t force it or prolong it. Even the Lord said, ‘my Spirit shall not always strive with mankind’. It’s not in God’s nature to strive perpetually. You could say that the default state of godliness is peace. When we are filled with the Spirit we want to be at peace. That does not make us passive – and the Spirit will cause the righteous indignation that causes us to contend for the faith when necessary. But being contentious is not godly. “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men” Rom 12:18. “For kings, and *for* all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.” I Thes 4:11: “1Th 4:11 And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you;”

So, God would have us be as gentle as doves but as wise as serpents. That means we must be focused. If there is one thing Satan loves it’s Christians chasing down a hundred rabbit-trails – believing that they are contending for the faith, when in reality all they’re doing is causing division, confusion and questions that can never be settled. It takes up the time, the resources and the energy of God’s people. It distracts from the main goal. We need to be focused. We need to be familiar with the real fight and the real enemy. The real fight is for faith – both ours and that of others. The real enemy is spiritual wickedness in high places, the world and our own flesh We need to be Spirit-filled so that we are a soldier of Christ, not a soldier of contention.