

‘All Greek To Me’ :

Manipulation

ἐριθεία eritheia

An interesting word which appears only 7 times in the New Testament, most often translated in modern versions as ‘selfish ambition’, ‘disputes’, ‘selfishness’ or ‘self-seeking’. The King James Authorised Version usually translates it as ‘strife’ or ‘contention’.

Obviously not a very pleasant word, describing an attitude and behaviour which are far from desirable in Christian fellowship. But there is more to it than just selfishness or contentiousness, though those are bad enough. The underlying meaning goes deeper, and I am indebted to *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* for ‘unpacking’ the word for me. Here are some of the useful points:

Originally meaning to spin wool or work in wool, it was later used to describe a worker who was hired on a daily basis. Aristotle (384 - 322 BC) used it to mean “electioneering or intriguing for office” “Hence, apparently, in the New Testament a courting (of) distinction, a desire to put one’s self forward, a partisan and factious spirit which does not disdain low arts; partisanship, factiousness”. (Thayer) The coincidence of the word ‘spin’ made me think of modern political ‘spin doctors’, who have no connection whatever with spinning wool, but whose activities sometimes seem to include a very similar approach. Especially, perhaps, ‘not disdaining the low arts’; i.e. quite happy to use deception and manipulation to achieve their objectives. With such an undercurrent of devious motivation, you can understand why Bible translators could not easily find an English word to represent it! ‘Selfish ambition’ comes pretty close, but just misses that manipulative undertone.

In most passages where it is used, the writer is concerned with relationships in the local church – a setting in which you would hope not to find manipulation!

Romans 2:3-11 *“But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practise such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and*

honour and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are **selfishly ambitious** and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honour and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.” In Paul’s explanation of God’s righteous judgment, *eritheia* sits right next to deliberate disobedience of the truth as a valid reason for God’s wrath and indignation.

2 Corinthians 12:20 “For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, **disputes**, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances . . .” Should these things be there in the relationships that they have in the church in Corinth? Of course not, but Paul loves these believers and is afraid that, when he visits them soon, he will find all or some of these things and will need to pour himself out again to help to put the situation right.

Galatians 5:19-26 “Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, **disputes**, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practise such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another”. In these two contrasting lists of ‘the deeds of the flesh’ and ‘the fruit of the Spirit’, there are several characteristics which only come to light in inter-personal relationships. *Eritheia* is there again, that manipulative and undermining force to try to fix things the way that **you** want them, and Paul says that it is one of the characteristics of ‘the flesh’, i.e. the ‘natural man’ who does not have the Spirit of God. But, he says, “those who are of Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” All of that has been dealt with through the death of the Lord Jesus and the fact that we have been included in it by being joined to him. So that makes it possible for us to live and ‘walk in line’ with the Holy Spirit. Glorious release!

Philippians 1:15-17 “Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defence of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of **selfish ambition**, not sincerely, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment.” What an ugly combination! Apparently proclaiming the good news of Jesus but actually only doing so for their own twisted reasons, to cause

additional distress to Paul! He calls it pretence, just an outward show.

Philippians 2:1-13 *“Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from **selfishness** or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”* Not simply the instruction **not** to act from manipulative *eritheia*, but contrasting it with the totally non-manipulative and unselfish example of the Lord Jesus. “Have this attitude in yourselves” Paul says. More literally, “let your mind work this way”.

James 3:13-18 *“Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behaviour his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and **selfish ambition** in your heart, do not be arrogant and lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and **selfish ambition** exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”* James is writing about wisdom and he does not mince his words. There is a ‘wisdom’ which seeks to craftily turn things round to our own advantage, but it is closely linked to arrogance and avoiding the truth, deliberately lying against it. Result: disorder and every evil thing! Not surprising when we see where it comes from!

Have you seen that sort of ‘wisdom’ in action? And among Christian believers? Sadly, I have, on two or three specific occasions in different fellowships, when certain people had a clear idea of how they felt things should go and then arranged things to make sure that their plan worked out. ¹ You could test their attitude against James’s description of ‘the wisdom from above’. In each case, it failed on all counts: not pure, not peaceable, not gentle, not reasonable, not

¹ For an example, see ‘[Twisted Unity](http://www.justonecandle.uk)’ at www.justonecandle.uk

full of mercy and good fruits, definitely wavering and full of hypocrisy!

“Oh, that could never happen to me!” we may protest but, if not, why these warnings against it from Paul and James? We might get what seems like a good idea and try to run with it, convincing ourselves that it’s such a good scheme that it **must** be God’s will, and perhaps even allowing ourselves to get a little angry if others do not see it the same way. That’s when it’s all too easy to try to fix things to make sure that our plan works out. And then, of course, if we succeed with that, we think that **proves** (to ourselves and especially to those who were not convinced) that it must have been the will of God all along! We may even pray and thank our Father for the way he sorted it out!!

That would be a good time to run James’s test about ‘the wisdom that is from above’. How does our plan match up? Especially the ways we have gone about making it happen and convincing other people . . .

I am not writing this to point any fingers at what anyone may or may not have done in specific situations. That is not my job; it is something that the Holy Spirit specialises in, giving us that persistent ‘dig’ that tells us when we have stepped out of line, however much we may try to persuade ourselves otherwise.

When we get that unrelenting and loving reminder, there is absolutely no point in finding any more excuses, such as “It’s all in the past now” or “No-one remembers that any more”. If the Holy Spirit is reminding us, then that’s because he knows we need to come clean, confess our fault to our Father, receive his forgiveness and put right any way that our actions and attitudes have affected other people. Not easy. But essential. And then we can move forward unhindered.

And for the future? It should be enough that we begin to recognise that this *eritheia*, this twisting of things to get our own way, is part of the way of the world system, characteristic of our **old** nature and, as Paul says, “*those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires*” and “*may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*” (**Galatians 5:24 & 6:14**) He knew that not only was his old life dead and buried but that using the world’s methods was off limits for him – the double effect of his identification with Jesus in his crucifixion.

“Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behaviour his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.” (**James 3:13**)

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