

## **Working Together**

*By Allen Dvorak*

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Debbie and I set up an aquarium at the end of last year. Too many dollars later, we bought our first tropical fish. I should tell you that we had a great deal of trouble getting the water balanced with the correct pH, ammonia content, etc. For the first few months, the water clarity varied from cloudy to a pea green that allowed a single inch of visibility. As we struggled to get everything right, becoming an occupant of our aquarium was the “kiss of death.”

We finally got the water crystal clear and have added several different kinds of fish who have managed to survive, allowing us to observe their behavior (I think that’s the point of this whole exercise!). Some types of tropical fish are good community fish and get along with others, while other types of fish are aggressive and territorial.

Among the current occupants of the aquarium are five “Black-skirt Tetras.” Four of them are almost identical in size, but the fifth is at least twice the size of the others. He(?) has decided that an area in the middle of the aquarium belongs exclusively to him. Any fish that swims through the 5” wide slice that belongs to him gets chased. There is actually plenty of space in the aquarium for all of the fish, but Mr. Big Skirt doesn’t want anyone in his space. It is interesting to observe the amount of energy he expends in the never-ending process of defending his turf.

Actually we have observed the same kind of behavior among the animals that visit the seed feeders in front of our house. Whether chipmunks, squirrels, or the various kinds of birds that frequent the feeders, it is commonplace to see territorial behavior. There will be plenty of seeds for all five male cardinals who are fluttering around the feeders, but one cardinal will inevitably spend his time chasing off the other four. Chipmunk A (don’t know their names!) will chase Chipmunk B off of the feeder, although there are plenty of seeds for both. As I watch their behavior, I can’t help but think to myself, “Why not share the seeds? There’s enough for everyone.” But, of course, that’s not the way nature works. The fish and the seed-eaters are just acting according to their instincts and laying claim to territory and/or available food supply.

Fortunately, we humans are not driven solely by instinct. We know how to work and play together peacefully. Or do we?

The great number of armed conflicts around the globe gives testimony to the fact that people don’t really behave any better than those members of the animal kingdom previously mentioned. Although not instinctual behavior, hatred, anger, revenge, prejudice, pride and selfishness prevent men from living peaceably with one another every bit as well as animal instincts.

Whether resulting in international conflict or corporate office politics, “territorial behavior” seen in aggression, physical or verbal, is often caused by pride or selfish ambition. Even positive accomplishments by others are interpreted as “threatening” and receive a defensive response. Even the defending of “personal honor” is seldom more than the overweening desire to look good in the eyes of others.

Selfish ambition – could that describe the motivation of the apostles of Jesus? The gospels record several instances of disputes among them about who would be the greatest in the kingdom. Even on the night of the last supper, they were concerned about such things (Luke 22:24)! Jesus informed them throughout His ministry that humility and service are the keys to greatness in His kingdom.

The apostle Paul encouraged harmony among the Philippians, warning them about selfish ambition and pride:

[Indent] <sup>1</sup> So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:1-4; ESV)

Even the preaching of the gospel can be motivated by selfish ambition! Paul noted that some were preaching Christ “from envy and rivalry” (Philippians 1:15; ESV) with the goal of adding affliction to his imprisonment.

Rather than being jealous of one another, as Christians we must remember that we have the same mission – to be zealous of good works and to teach others about Jesus and the salvation He offers. Instead of building our own “influence” and “reputation,” we should be concerned about glorifying our Father by our good works (“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” – Matthew 5:16).

We should take joy in the spiritual accomplishments and talents of brethren. Jealousy arising from the fact that someone else is praised for good work is not uncommon and the “green monster” can destroy relationships and tear apart the work being done by the members of a local congregation. We are a team with a tremendous task; there is no room for jealousy, selfish ambition or competition for “credit.”

I continue to be impressed with the foolishness of those “seed-eaters” who waste their energies trying to keep others away from the blessing of food. I also wonder what God must think about the behavior of men whose behavior is no different in substance.

“Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Psalm 133:1; ESV)

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