

“How to Handle Conflict”

Philippians 4:1-3

I heard a story about two men who lived in a small village, and got into a terrible dispute that they could not resolve. So they decided to talk to the village wise man. The first man went to the wise man's home and told his version of what happened. When he finished, the wise man said, “You're absolutely right.” The next day, the second man called on the wise man and told his side of the story. The wise man responded, “You're absolutely right.” Afterward, the wise man's wife scolded her husband. And she said, “Those men told you two different stories and you told them they were absolutely right. That's impossible—they can't both be absolutely right.” The wise man turned to his wife and said, “You're absolutely right.”

Let's turn in our Bibles this morning to the fourth chapter of Philippians, a passage in which Paul deals with an issue of conflict within the Philippian church. This conflict involved two women who were at odds with each other, and it began to draw other people to various sides. In a world where we constantly bump into each other for a variety of reasons, relational conflict is inevitable. We will not see eye-to-eye with everyone on everything. Because we are imperfect, we will offend others with our words and with our actions. Perhaps this is a fitting message, especially now that we're just a few days after Christmas. There's no telling just how much conflict has been experienced. Family get togethers sometimes bring with them unwanted tension as tempers flare up. Old wounds resurface. Conversation spirals into argument over politics, parenting styles, and just about any other thing you can imagine. Conflict isn't limited to family or marriage relationships. We encounter it at work, or out in public, or on the road. We see it among people on social media. We even encounter it at church. Someone once wrote a little poem that says it this way:

*To live above with the saints we love,
O, that will be wonder and glory;
But to live below with the saints we know,
Well, that is a different story!*

The apostle Paul addresses an issue of ongoing conflict within the church at Philippi, and he mentions the names of those who were involved. But rather than dealing with it in a combative way, Paul is both clear and gracious, thereby providing us a model for how to handle conflict in our life.

I don't know of anything more needed in our time than the proper understanding of how to handle conflict. Going all the way back to the dawn of history, conflict has been an ongoing issue in human relationships. Wherever you find people, you will also find conflict. The word itself is defined as a serious disagreement, an argument, or a long-lasting struggle. Other words that may come to mind are dispute, clash, quarrel, fight, and dissension. It all describes what is involved in conflict. Though we would not want to admit it, this kind of thing is often found within the church among the relationships which exist between Christians. And when conflict isn't handled properly, it results in greater conflict. Whenever this becomes the environment within the church, the ministry and witness of the church will always be badly affected.

Now, let me be quick to point out that there are those times when it is essential to stand your ground on an issue and refuse to compromise what you know to be biblical truth. It may not be comfortable to deal with the fallout from such a thing, but it is necessary. But more often than not the nasty infighting among believers is over petty things. Not things such as the virgin birth, vicarious death and resurrection, or visible return of Jesus. No, the conflict that often erupts in the church among fellow believers is centered in the things that have no eternal significance at all. That's not just the case within the church, but it is often true within our family or our marriage or our relationships with friends. Conflict is bound to happen when two people are at odds with each other over a particular issue.

Though they lived in the first century, the church at Philippi was no different from the church in the 21st century. It was a great church, but it was not a perfect church. They knew what it meant to experience strife and dissension. And by what Paul writes in these verses, two of the leading ladies within the congregation were at the heart of what could be a potential powder keg. Their disagreement was spilling over into the rest of

the congregation, others were no doubt taking sides, so that a rift was beginning to form within the fellowship of the church. The situation had reached a point where Paul has to address it publicly in his letter.

It is a lesson in the fact that Christians can face conflict like everyone else. It invades our relationships and makes its presence known when we least expect it to. It might lead to a loud disagreement. Or, it might be barely under the radar and manifest itself through gossip and tension. We may not know what to do when we experience it, but we're not left without counsel. God's Word gives us instruction on how to handle conflict. When it is left unaddressed or is tackled in the wrong way, it can be disastrous. However, if we respond to it in the right way, we can come out on the other more mature and the better for having faced it. In other words conflict handled well can be beneficial (Acts 6).

By way of introduction, let me give you at least three root causes behind conflict we often encounter with others. You may want to write these down for future reference:

Some conflict comes from differing personalities.

Each of us is like a different part of the human body, which is an analogy that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 12. We each have an important role to play. And we each bring different perspectives and gifts to life. Such a God-given diversity leads to natural differences. Since God has created us as unique individuals, we all have certain differences. If we handle these differences well, that's a good thing. It keeps life interesting. And so conflict can sometimes arise when two very different people see things from a differing point of view. We need to learn how to steward these differences and keep the glory of God in mind above everything else, or the conflict can spiral into something else. God desires unity, not uniformity. Unity means we are of one purpose, one mind, one heart. Uniformity means we are clones of each other. And that's not a good thing!

Some conflict comes from simple misunderstandings.

As someone who communicates for a living, I appreciate a benefit of the doubt here. There isn't a person alive who communicates things perfectly. Sometimes, we say things that aren't clear. And sometimes we hear things that aren't said. Such misunderstandings can result in conflict. Our fallen nature is such that we take offense and assume the worst. That's why we need to be quick to hear and slow to speak! (I easily get those reversed!)

Some conflict comes from sinful attitudes and actions.

We say and do things that are motivated by selfishness or self-centeredness, and it will always lead to conflict with the other people in our lives. Now, of these three root causes of conflict, we're not told what was at the root of the issue in Philippi. But regardless of what caused the problem, it is evident that there needed to be a solution fast. And so as Christian men and women, how do we handle conflict when it happens? We can learn from Paul's response here in the text. First of all, it involves:

1—A healthy AFFECTION for people (4:1-2a)

"Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord."

The word 'therefore' in verse 1 marks a practical transition from the truth Paul has been explaining to the application of that truth in the believer's life. Remember, he has just made a statement about our ultimate hope. Believers are citizens of heaven, and we are waiting for the return of the Lord Jesus. When He comes, He will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body. Therefore, Paul says, we ought to stand firm in the Lord and refuse to allow anything to undermine the foundation upon which our hope rests. It means the gospel shapes and informs our relationships. I am to stand firm in the things of God, and this is key when it comes to working through problems that arise. Without it I have no solid foundation. Earlier in the letter, Paul had written:

1:27—"Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are

standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.”

This is something that Paul frequently says in his letters:

1 Corinthians 16:13—“Stand firm in the faith.”

Galatians 5:1—“Keep standing firm.”

1 Thessalonians 3:8—“For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.”

2 Thessalonians 2:15—“So then, brethren, stand firm.”

Paul wants these believers whom he greatly loves to stand firm, to stay on the same page, and not be divided. His words in this text are deeply personal and are a reminder of the value of people and how the gospel brings us into close relationship with one another. Paul is expressing affection for his Philippian friends. It might surprise you to learn the fact that even a man like the apostle Paul needed the help and encouragement of other people. It is obvious when we read Paul’s letters that he had a love for people. He’s always mentioning people by name. He expresses gratitude for the way that God was working in their lives. He acknowledges their contributions to his ministry and lists them as his fellow workers. Consider that in the last chapter of Romans alone, he mentions the names of 28 people. His words here are no different. Pay attention to these tender words of affection used in verse 1:

- “Brothers whom I love and long for”

By referring to them as brothers, Paul is acknowledging the family bond that they have with one another in the church. These are people that Paul greatly loves and longs for. He values them not for what they can do for him, but for who they are as the family of God. The church is a fellowship of brothers and sisters who now share a common life. Now, that doesn’t mean the church is not without problems, for every church has its share of issues because it is made up of people. Church people can have this tendency to have all sorts of disagreements over trivial issues. There can be personality disagreements, or style issues, and leadership quarrels. I read about a cartoon that

was in Leadership Magazine, where they showed a little cartoon of a solemn-faced pastor behind his pulpit. He stopped in the middle of his sermon and was reading a note and said in the cartoon, “We interrupt this sermon to inform you that the fourth grade boys are now in complete control of their Sunday school class and are holding Ms. Mosby hostage.” Now, to my knowledge, I don’t think we’ve had any teachers taken hostage yet. But throughout the years, I have had some very interesting experiences in church. The ministry of a church is always the ministry of people. It’s never about brick and mortar, or carpet and pews. It’s never about the property. It’s really about people. That’s what a church is—it is a group of people that are called out from the world to be together as a family.

- “My joy and crown”

He calls them my joy. That is important because the theme of the letter has been joy. Around 18 times, Paul mentions either joy or rejoicing. In describing them in such a way, it means part of his joy was wrapped up in them—in people. He says they are his loved and longed-for brethren, my joy. And he doesn’t stop there. He calls them my crown. It is a Greek word ‘stephanos.’ It is the crown of an athlete, or a wreath that is placed on the head of somebody who runs a race in an Olympic event. It is the crown of a runner who wins the prize. That was what the church was to Paul. He knew his labors had not been in vain. He looked forward to the day when he stood before the Lord and these believers represented the ‘spiritual fruit’ of his ministry labors.

Steven Lawson—*“Who is the crown upon your head? To whom have you passed on the Word of God? A son or daughter? A person to whom you have witnessed for Christ? The members of your small-group Bible study? A colleague at work?”*

Each of us should labor for a crown like that, one we can some day lay down at Jesus’ feet!

- “Stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved”

He called them “my beloved.” It means my loved ones. It means you are loved by God. You are loved by me. This is Paul’s way of saying ‘I love you’ to this church. And we

know that, according to Jesus, the hallmark of the church should be love. Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples if you love one another.” Now, why is that? How could we ever preach the gospel of the love of God, if we don’t practice the gospel of the love of God? No man has seen God at any time. God is invisible. And the unbelieving world likes to point that out. They say, “O, you talk to me about God. Prove God to me. Let me see God. That’s just a way that weak people have of getting through a difficult life—believing in some higher power.” But love takes the invisible God and makes Him visible.

John writes about this when he says:

1 John 4:12—“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another God abides in us and His love is perfected in us.”

So you see, if the world could possibly see a community of authentic, caring, loving, forgiving people, who love one another across a variety of barriers, they might listen up to what we have to say. Paul wants the church to know how much he loves them. They are loved by God. It is subtle reminder that they should be characterized by love for one another. Now all of this is important for what Paul has to say about the conflict which was happening in the church between these two ladies who are at odds with each other.

2—An honest ASSESSMENT of the problem (4:2b)

“I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.”

Notice in verse 2 that healthy words of affection give way to Paul’s honest assessment of the problem. Love does not pretend there are no problems. It doesn’t sweep the issues under the rug. Instead, love works through conflict for the sake of relationship. That’s what needed to happen in the church at Philippi.

Put yourself in the shoes of these Philippian believers who are hearing Paul’s letter being read. I imagine that if any of them were dozing off in the Sunday service while the letter was being read, they were all wide awake now! Paul does not speak in vague

generalities, but is specific and precise in mentioning the names of those who were at odds with one another. We're not told what the nature of the conflict was, but it was serious enough for the apostle Paul to write about it in his letter. While it might seem blunt to us, Paul is actually being diplomatic. It is his desire that these two women at the center of the conflict get together before their rift further divides the church.

He is gracious in his approach

This is seen in the use of the word 'entreat' or 'urge.' It is the word 'parakaleo' in Greek and means to call along side, to exhort and encourage. When used as a noun, this term is used to describe the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He is the 'Helper' or the Paraclete. Paul is urging both of these two women to face their issues and work through them. They must set aside their differences for the sake of unity. And the fact that he uses the word 'entreat' twice may suggest that both of them are at fault. It isn't a one-sided issue.

Now, while we're not told anything about the nature of their conflict, we can understand something about the source of it. Where does conflict come from? What is it that makes us so very susceptible to its presence in our relationships with other people? Well, James asks a similar question before providing us with an answer. He writes:

James 4:1-3—"What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."

With penetrating honesty, James gets straight to the source behind so much of our relational conflict in life. And notice he uses very descriptive terms—quarrels, fights. The first term comes from the Greek word for war and conveys this scene of hostility between opposing parties. The second term he uses refers to smaller skirmishes and an overall state of disharmony. Where does it all come from? Listen to James as he answers his own question, "Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?" It

means the strong desire to get what one does not have, the passion to get what one wants regardless. That kind of craving drives us to selfish actions. If getting what I want means a fight, I will fight. If it means an argument, I will argue. If it means enlisting others to join my cause, I will do so. I'll even kill if it becomes necessary. And so it is selfish desire that lies at the heart of most of our conflict. When I don't get what I want in a situation, I can react sinfully.

The conflict between Euodia and Syntyche was relational, and they needed to be reconciled. There is usually some kind of progression in how a situation like this escalates in a person's spirit. Paul explains this progression elsewhere when he says:

Ephesians 4:31 — “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.”

What begins with bitterness over an offense then leads to wrath, a seething rage on the inside. It builds and builds until you lose your temper. Something is said or done that touches on a nerve. When bitterness has compounded in a person, it becomes easy to say something hurtful in a moment of rage. It leads to animosity and clamor where we begin to say things without any fear of reprisals. And we slander the other person, which leads to malice and evil behavior. So that what started off as an offense festers in a person until ends in malice toward the offender. When we don't know how to work through these things, there will no doubt be a string of broken relationships and unresolved conflict that seems to always follow us around. That's why Paul is so urgent in this situation. He says, “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche.” Don't allow the problem to continue to fester and pollute other relationships. Just a little bit of leaven will leaven the whole lump!

He is clear in his admonition

The goal of Paul's instruction is to encourage these women 'to agree in the Lord.' There was so much more that they had in common than the issue which was dividing them. It is only 'in the Lord' that they will find common ground. The solution to our conflict is found 'in the Lord!'

Ken Sande is someone who has written a lot on the subject of conflict. In his book *The Peace Maker*, he explains how there are three basic ways that people respond to conflict. The first category involves **escape** responses. People will respond this way when they're more interested in avoiding a conflict than in resolving it. This kind of thing is common in church because many Christians believe that all conflict is wrong or dangerous. Assuming that Christians should always agree, or fearing that conflict will inevitably damage relationships, these people will usually try to escape from conflict through:

- Denial

One way to escape from a conflict is to pretend that it does not exist. Or, if we cannot deny that the problem exists, we simply refuse to do what should be done to resolve conflict properly. These responses bring only temporary relief and usually make matters worse (Gen. 16:1-6; 1 Sam. 2:22-25).

- Flight

Another way to escape from a conflict is to run away from it by leaving the house, ending a friendship, quitting a job, or changing churches. In most cases, running away will only delay a proper solution to the problem (Gen. 16:6-8). That is why flight is usually a harmful and not helpful way to deal with conflict. Of course, there may times when temporarily withdrawing from a situation is necessary and helpful to allow tempers to cool. We may need space to pray and get our emotions under control. Or in tense and threatening situations that are dangerous.

Those are escape responses. A second category involves **attack** responses. These are the responses by those who are far more interested in winning a fight than preserving a relationship. This attitude is seen in people who view it as an opportunity to assert their rights, to manipulate others, or take advantage of a situation. These are the responses by those who tend to be more self-confident and assertive than those who are more timid or shy. But sometimes even the most mild person can come out swinging whenever he feels he's been backed into a corner.

- Assault

Attack responses try to bring as much pressure as they can on their opponents to eliminate the opposition. They bully or manipulate to get their way. One one hand, it can mean I come out with guns blazing.

- Litigation

In other words, you plead your case with as many people who will sympathize with you as possible. You go to family or friends, colleagues, and even complete strangers about your situation. You explain the harm you suffered at the hands of the other person. You build a case and try to sway other people to your side. If escape responses are focused on me, choosing what is easy for me, what is non-threatening to me, then attack responses are focused on you. You are the problem. You are to be blamed. You should cave in so the problem can go away.

There is a better way to resolving conflict than escape or attack. That way is **peacemaking**. This type of response shifts the focus away from me, shifts the focus away from you, and zeroes in on us. It keeps the Lord and His will in full focus. It draws on the resources that we've received in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It keeps the glory of God at the forefront of our thinking. It is the way of humility that lays aside personal hurts and desires and wants for the other person what we would want for ourselves. This type of response is the only way to keep conflict from spinning out of control. This is what Paul calls for in Philippi.

3—A helpful ATTITUDE of a peacemaker (4:3)

“Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.”

Euodia and Syntyche needed to come together, but these women hadn't done anything to reconcile their differences by themselves. And so Paul calls on a 'true companion' to step in as a mediator and help them. Different translations say 'true yokefellow.' Now,

the name of this individual isn't mentioned. It could have been an elder or pastor, or some apostolic representative. I like to think that it was someone who is spiritually mature and close to the situation who will act as a go between so that the situation wouldn't fester. It is imperative in Paul's thinking that these two ladies get on the same page. Their issue was affecting the testimony of the entire church. And so Paul appeals to true companion to act as a peacemaker who can help bring them together so they can live in harmony with each other.

“Help”—*a strong word which means to seize or grasp*

Paul is calling for a spiritually mature individual to step in and take hold of the situation for the sake of peace before things got any further out of hand. And notice how Paul is referring to them positively in verse 3. Though they were at odds with one another, these two women had at one time labored side by side with Paul in the gospel, along with a man named Clement, and the rest of his fellow workers whose names are in the book of life. There was a team spirit that characterized the Philippian church.

Steven Lawson—*“These believers were not a series of islands, disconnected from each other, each person doing their own thing. Instead, they were shouldering the ministry load together, standing as one in the cause of the gospel.”*

So they had been committed to the gospel, involved in the work of God, and faithful to the ministry of the church. But this rift between Euodia and Syntyche is affecting everyone else in what had been a tightly knit congregation. Notice in verse 3 that Paul reminds them all that their names are in the book of life. It is a reminder to them of their citizenship, and ought to be an incentive for them to work things out. It is also a reminder to us that even Christians have serious disagreements. But the way we respond to conflict ought to be very different than the unbelieving world around us. It is an opportunity for us to grow stronger and deeper in our relationships with one another and with God. I've found it to be true that most of the everyday conflict we experience can be resolved by simply letting go of the offenses that will come from other people. Perhaps we can ask ourselves the question, “Is this worth getting all stewed up about?”

It is amazing to me at how many times in Scripture we're told to overlook an offense. For example:

Proverbs 15:1—“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

Proverbs 17:14—“The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so quit before the quarrel breaks out.”

Proverbs 19:11—“A man's wisdom gives him patience, it is to his glory to overlook an offense.”

Ephesians 4:1-3—“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

1 Peter 4:8—“Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.”

The ability to overlook an offense is rare, especially in our day of making a profession out of being offended. But you know something, that is how God deals with us. Psalm 103 says the Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will He harbor His anger forever. He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. That's called grace, my friend. God has dealt with my sin in Christ. And as a man who has been forgiven, I'm free to forgive those who sin against me. In his book *Laugh Again* Chuck Swindoll tells the following story:

“Charles H. Spurgeon, Baptist minister of London, England, had a pastor friend, Dr. Newman Hall, who wrote a book entitled, ‘Come to Jesus.’ Another preacher published an article in which he ridiculed Hall, who bore it patiently for a little while. But when the article gained popularity, Hall sat down and wrote a letter of protest. His answer was full of retaliatory invectives that outdid anything in the article which attacked him. Before

mailing the letter, Hall took it to Spurgeon for his opinion. Spurgeon read it carefully then, handing it back, asserted it was excellent and that the writer of the article deserved it all. 'But,' he added, 'it just lacks one thing.' After a pause Spurgeon continued, 'Underneath your signature you ought to write the words, Author of Come to Jesus.' The two godly men looked at each other for a few minutes. Then Hall tore the letter to shreds."

I wonder if you might have a list of grievances with another person this morning that needs to be shredded? Whether or not you're right or wrong isn't the issue. What matters is your relationship with God. What matters is whether or not you know the joy that His peace brings. It is only "in the Lord" that our conflict will find its ultimate resolution.