

## Conflict: Part 1 - Why Do We Have Conflict?

Happy New Year! I don't know what New Year traditions you have, but in our family, we have a set of questions that we all sit down and write the answers down to. These questions look back on the previous year and look ahead to the upcoming year.

We started this almost 10 years ago so it's very interesting to look back over the answers from previous years. I did that this time for my own and certain themes started to emerge. I always ask for 2 goals for the coming year and most of the time my goals have to do with running and reading. One of the questions asks if you could take a vacation anywhere in the world this coming year, where would you go? It seems to me that there are two places I want to go. Either London or the Caribbean.

Seeing how similar my answers have been made me think about how this year will probably bring some new things into it, but it will also be filled with many of the same experiences and difficulties. And for you as well as for me, I can guarantee that you will experience interpersonal conflict this coming year. I have no doubt that you will get mad at someone, have an argument and a significant disagreement. You will either give someone the silent treatment or have it given to you.

You're going to have relational conflict this year, but the question is, how will you handle it? I'm sure you've developed certain automatic responses and methods of dealing with it. You drive in the same car on the same road and some of you have been handling conflict your way for 40 or 50 years.

Since this is going to be a part of our lives this year and since Scripture addresses this head on, I want to start this year by trying to help us all navigate interpersonal conflict in a way that is shaped by the Bible and that leads to real healing and peace in our relationships. We're going to spend the first 5 Sundays of the year studying this topic of conflict and we're basically going to answer two questions: Why do we have conflict and how do we handle it? Let's start with that first

question this morning and here's what we will see: **2 Reasons We Have Conflict That Shape Our Response To It.**

### **1. General Reason: Defectiveness**

It's tempting sometimes to think that "theology" is not very practical. That it's simply dry and dusty academic talk for theology nerds. In reality, theology is simply the teaching of the Bible summarized and put together and there's nothing more helpful and beneficial to daily life than theology.

When it comes to understanding conflict and handling it, we have to start with the Bible's teaching about sin because this helps us understand why conflict is such a regular occurrence in our lives. Missing this theological truth is like driving a car with a bent axle and not knowing what an axle is. You can say all you want that you just want practical help for the daily experience of driving your car, but what you really need is to know that your axle is bent completely out of shape.

The foundational underlying reason for conflict is the Christian doctrine of original sin. We are all born into this world defective, twisted, and broken because of sin. Sin is now normal and natural to us and this expresses itself in broken relationships. You see this immediately in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve choose to sin. Turn to Genesis 3 with me.

You can go back and read Genesis 1-2 later on but let me give you a summary of relationships in these chapters. *"Up until Genesis 3, relationships presented in the Bible are based on radical openness, complete intimacy, and mutual love, just like the relationships between the three persons of the Trinity..."*

You see this between God and man, between man and wife, and between man and creation. Everything exists in perfect harmony and unity. All is good and all works together. But then the author of this quote continues: *...The immediate and striking effect of sin in Genesis 3 is that a lightning bolt of alienation cleaves apart this matrix of relationships."* - Christopher Watkin

Let's read Genesis 3:1-6. You can already see in the serpent's temptation the introduction of conflict. The serpent questions God's goodness and His relationship with Adam and Eve. Did God really say? Isn't God withholding

something good from you? Adam and Eve believe the lie and eat the fruit and the splintering of everything into a million pieces all at odds with one another begins. Look at verse 7. No more openness. Instead shame. Now, instead of delight in fellowship with God, they run and hide in alienation. Look at verses 8-9. Alienation from God brings internal division and conflict within each human. Look at verse 10. This brings conflict with one another. Listen to verses 11-13. How had Adam related to his wife before this? Listen to Genesis 2:23-25. Delight has turned to disgust.

The alienation, division, and conflict spills over into every area of life. In verses 14-15 you see the enmity between the descendants of the serpent and of the woman. In verse 16 you see the contrary nature of human relationships and in verses 17-19 the conflict between humans and creation.

There's been a rupture in God's good creation and now humans have a defect. We have taken on the divisive character of the serpent. *"Warmaking is a prime trait of sinners. It's the image of Satan: liar, murderer, divider, aggressor."* – David Powlison

This is the general reason for conflict in our world and relationships. But there's a more specific and personal reason that this happens in your life today. Look back with me to Genesis 3:6. Eve's desires took control. Our desires have now been corrupted, and they lead us into fighting and conflict all the time.

## **2. Personal Reason: Desires**

Turn with me to James 4. There's probably no better passage to help us diagnose our bent toward conflict than this one. Listen to verses 1-2. Notice all the words James uses to describe the symptom, conflict and the diagnose of the underlying disease, your out of control unmet desires.

This is one of those moments where the Bible is quite clear and simple. You can try to do a deep dive into your past or your present situation or any number of other possibilities, but the Bible tells you that 100% of the time you have conflict because of some unmet desire.

There's a book that we will reference often in this series on conflict called *The Peacemaker*. It's by Ken Sande and it's kind of the definitive guide for Christians to resolving personal conflict. In fact, Sande started an organization called Peacemaker Ministries that helps Christians resolve conflicts. They will come into a church or family situation and help Christians navigate the conflict and come to a peaceful resolution.

In this book Sande lays out the 4 steps in the progression of a desire to become an idol and I think this will be helpful for us to understand how our desires turn into conflict. Because it's not wrong to have desires. We all have desires and some of them aren't bad at all. But you can even see in James 4 that it's not just having a desire that causes the fighting. It's when the desire takes control that fighting begins.

- I Desire

This is the starting point for understanding conflict and even for avoiding conflict. It's not wrong to desire something and you will have many desires this week. But it's vital to diagnose what you desire. When conflict arises, take a moment to walk back from the conflict to your desire and try to pinpoint what you are wanting.

Desires aren't wrong in and of themselves, but because of our sin defect they can become problematic. We can desire the wrong thing, or we can desire the right thing at the wrong time or in the wrong amount. It's not wrong to want a relaxing evening after work. But that desire can quickly and easily turn into a cause for conflict when it becomes a demand.

- I Demand

You want that relaxing evening and it gets challenged and seems like it's not going to happen. Dishes need to be done; laundry has to be folded. Kids homework must be attended to. But you wanted some "self-care" time. In that moment you can allow a sinful focus on self to turn that desire into a demand and you can start fighting to get what you want. Listen again to James 4:1-2.

Sande puts it like this: *The trouble is that if these seemingly legitimate desires are not met, we can find ourselves in a vicious cycle. The more we want something, the more we think we need and deserve it. And the more we think we are entitled to something, the more convinced we are that we cannot be happy and secure without it... Even if the initial desire was not inherently wrong, it has grown so strong that it begins to control our thoughts and behavior. In biblical terms, it has become an idol.*" - Ken Sande

Here's the important point for handling conflict. Behind every fight and quarrel, no matter how big or small, lies a desire that has turned into a demand. And this is because of the next step.

- I Judge

You know how this goes. An unmet desire turns into a controlling demand and suddenly you start to critically evaluate the motives of the other person. "You don't understand how hard I work. I need some time to rest." This judgment may happen in your mind, or it may spill out into your words. And ultimately this leads to fighting and conflict to protect and appease the idol.

- I Punish

Sande puts it like this: *"Idols always demand sacrifices. When someone fails to satisfy our demands and expectations, our idol demands that he should suffer. Whether deliberately or unconsciously, we will find ways to hurt or punish people so that they will give in to our desires."* – Ken Sande

I didn't get what I wanted, therefore, you must suffer until you give me what I want or until my idol has been satisfied.

This is the progression and this takes place in our individual lives because of our defect of sin. Rather than trusting and worshiping God as the true source of joy and fulfillment, we now create idols of our desires and then fight to worship those idols because we believe they will bring us lasting joy and satisfaction.

Of course, the problem is the same problem that Adam and Eve faced in the garden. Behind every idol and unmet demand is a lie. Instead of worshiping our

desires to the point where we fight over them, listen to the initial answer James gives in 4:4-10.

So, in our effort to learn how to better handle conflict in our lives and relationships, we must start here. Why do we even have conflict? We have it because of our defect of sin and our unmet desires. These answers give us hope because Jesus Christ came into the world to straighten what was bent by the fall and to heal broken relationships and bring reconciliation. So, these series will point us to Christ's work and how we can live that out in our daily lives. Let's end this morning with 2 Cor. 5:17-21. Let's pray.

## Sermon Reflection Questions – 1/4/26

- Did you have any specific goals for the coming year?
- Is there a particular way you find yourself handling conflict on a regular basis?
- Briefly explain the general reason that we have interpersonal conflict.
- Describe relationships before Genesis 3.
- What are some of the divisions that enter the picture in Genesis 3?
- Why is it important to understand the general reason for conflict before getting into specifics?
- Explain the personal reason for conflict that James describes in James 4.
- What are some possible other reasons for conflict that you may hear in the broader culture?
- Give an example of a legitimate desire that can become a demand.
- Describe the 3<sup>rd</sup> step in the progression of a desire to an idol. What would this look like in daily life?

- What “cure” does James give in James 4 to our unmet desires and conflict?
- What area of your life is most prone to conflict?