

- We are in week 3 of a new series called “Spiritual Development Practices”
  - These are practices that will make us better at life. It is not some vague, churchy kind of thing. They are practices that change the day-to-day form of our lives for the better.
  - We call them practices because we are always growing in them. We never arrive.
  - We are practicing loving God. We looked at how prayer and Scripture are ways to grow in that.
  - We are going to look at a couple of ways we can practice loving the world in the weeks ahead.
  - For today, I want to look at one very specific way we practice loving each other. In fact, it is the number one thing that shows the world around us that we are different.
- One of the universal laws of this world is this: If you have relationships, you will have conflict.
  - They didn’t like my post – I know they saw it because they liked her post but not my post. What did I do? Fine, I won’t like their post. In fact, I am going to Instagram something that purposely excludes them.
  - They walked past me and didn’t say hi. What is wrong with them? I didn’t do anything – they are just jerks. Two can play that game.
  - I finally got up the nerve to pray out loud – right after the prayer they make a funny comment about what I prayed for and everyone laughed. I am not going back to that group.
  - My spouse got angry again. They raised their voice. It’s the same thing as always. They criticize the same things. I am trying to get better but they obviously don’t recognize it. I think I will work some longer hours.
  - They talked about me behind my back.
  - They manipulated to get me passed over at work again.
  - My child is still not listening and is rebelling against me.
  - They didn’t live up to their commitment.
  - I was hurt.
  - They knew better.
  - They did that on purpose.
  - I just don’t have time for that stuff.
  - I am never calling them again.
  - None of this makes life better. In fact, if you are in any conflict that is unresolved, it never leaves you in a happy place where you can live life the way you want to.
  - It doesn’t even seem to matter if you think you are in the right or not.
- It is unrealistic to think that just because you decide to follow Jesus that conflict will stop.
  - Relational issues don’t end because you follow Jesus, go to church or are religious. That has never been, nor should it be, a defining mark for those who follow Jesus.
  - However, what IS supposed to define who we are is how we respond and act in the midst of conflict.
  - Jesus, just before he died, sat with his disciples and told them this:  
*John 13:34 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*
  - The new command was not loving each other. That was always around. The new command was all about how they were to love each other. We are to follow the model of Jesus.
  - And it is how we act towards one another that is the distinguishing mark of being a follower of Jesus.

- The world around us often looks at church and says we are bunch of hypocrites. It is not because we have conflict. They see us that way because we don't respond to conflict any different than everybody else.
- What do we do when relationships are breaking down? How do we respond? How can we do this differently when everything inside of us leans in the other direction?
- The fundamental truth that I want us to grasp is this: **EVERY CONFLICT IS AN OPPORTUNITY** because *how you respond to conflict determines the results of that conflict in your life.*

## Illumination

- **EVERY CONFLICT IS AN OPPORTUNITY**. It is not a threat (although it feels like one). It is not how you have to prove yourself (although that's often how we respond).
- **EVERY CONFLICT IS AN OPPORTUNITY** because *how you respond to conflict determines the results of that conflict in your life.*
- This is so important, because:

### I. Conflict handled poorly damages me and those around me.

- There are so many examples of conflict handled poorly in Scripture.
- The first brothers in the bible ended with one murdering the other.
- Isaac cheated Esau and lived on the run for 20 years.
- Samson didn't listen to his parents and lost his freedom, his eyesight and eventually his life.
- Judas got angry and betrayed the Lord.
- There is one particularly compelling story that most of you are familiar with.
- Joseph, the second youngest son of Jacob's 12 sons. A bit of a spoiled brat. A tattletale. He had dreams that seemed to elevate him above his brothers that he bragged about to his family. Little conflict after little conflict. It got so bad that one day when he was sent by his father to find his brothers, they saw their opportunity to get even.

*Genesis 37:17 So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. 18 But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. 19 "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. 20 "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."*

- This is the result of much conflict handled poorly.
  - Thankfully, they did not end up killing him, but they did sell him into slavery in Egypt.
- 31 Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. 32 They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe." 33 He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces." 34 Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave." So his father wept for him. 36 Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard.*
- The brothers wanted to get back at Joseph, and they did. They sold him. They won the argument. They won the conflict.
  - They destroyed the father whom they had not intended to do.
  - The family dynamic was ruined.
  - We find that the brothers themselves lived with guilt and shame for years to come.

- Conflict handled poorly damages me and those around me.
- Studies have shown there are not only relational consequences, but health consequences. Worse sleep. Tiredness. Loneliness. Lower life expectancy.
- What causes conflict?

*James 4:1 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? 2 You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.*

- Step 1: "I desire" – Conflict always begins with desire. I desire to be treated a certain way. I desire someone to do something for me. I desire a loving husband. I desire a child that listens. I desire a wife that respects me. Most of these desires are actually good. The problem happens when our desire is unmet and we move to:
- Step 2: "I demand" – When our desire is unmet, we begin to push the issue. We become convinced that we cannot be happy and secure without it. If they loved me, they should do this.
- Step 3: "I judge" – When others fail us or fail to live up to our expectations, we criticize or condemn them, either verbally or in our hearts. We become convinced of our own rightness and their error.
- Step 4: "I punish" – We try to find ways to force them to give in to our desires. This usually takes one of two forms.
- We try to escape. We withdraw. We defend ourselves, we back off, we go into a shell, we stop talking, we make peace without dealing with the issue or conflict. We look for diversions to avoid the conflict. We work longer hours. Divorce becomes an option. Kids move out. The ultimate form of this is suicide.
- The other alternative is to attack. To get louder, to push. The need to win. To get violent. The ultimate expression of this is murder.
- Conflict handled poorly damages me and others.
- When you have unresolved conflict, it lurks in the background, ready to pop to the surface (like a beach ball under water that suddenly pops up).
- It occupies our mind space. We worry about it. We are bitter. We talk about it a lot.
- For some of you:
- There is someone you are currently angry with. Irritated. Avoiding.
- Your marriage does not have the intimacy you wish it did.
- Your family is broken and there are people you do not talk to and haven't for years.
- Your work environment is toxic.
- When someone tells me they are over a conflict, that they have forgiven, but they still avoid that person or constantly re-visit the topic (even in their own minds) it is a sign that it has still not been handled.
- *"Conflict cannot survive without your participation."* (Wayne Dyer)
- **EVERY CONFLICT IS AN OPPORTUNITY.** Handled poorly, it damages us and others, but:

## **II. Conflict handled well brings life and peace.**

- Eventually, through God's providence, Joseph and his brothers come face to face again. 15 years later.
- Joseph is now the ruler of Egypt. A powerful man. His brothers are needy. Vulnerable.
- They have multiple confrontations and then he finally reveals himself.

*Genesis 45:3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. 4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! 5 And now, do not be distressed and do not be*

*angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. . . 14 Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.*

- There is forgiveness. Reconciliation. The relationships begin to be repaired. And there is a lot of damage to be fixed. Years of bitterness, anger, estrangement, guilt, and more.
- Joseph handled the conflict well and brought life and peace to himself and back to the family.
- In order to deal with conflict well, there are 3 truths that help steer our thinking.
- Truth #1: Every time you encounter a conflict, you will inevitably show what you really think of God.
- This is an important idea. Conflict reveals whether we trust God, think he is good, whether or not he cares, and our level of obedience. This is one of those areas that reveals pretty quickly if it is all talk, or if we are walking the walk.
- Joseph walked the walk. He trusted God. He saw the big picture. It impacted how he dealt with this conflict.
- To say we love God but live in unforgiveness and anger, unwilling to work through it, makes us out to be liars.
- Truth #2: God uses conflict to expose sinful attitudes and habits in our lives. This is true even when the conflict is not our fault.
- Attitudes that lie hidden when things are good pop to the surface in conflict.
- The years in Egypt shaped Joseph because he was willing to let God do it.
- In order to treat conflict as a helpful opportunity, we must be willing to look at those sinful attitudes and habits when they come up and engage with Jesus in that process.
- Truth #3: "God knows that you cannot control other people, so he will not hold you responsible for the ultimate outcome of a conflict." He will hold us accountable for how we acted in that conflict.
- **EVERY CONFLICT IS AN OPPORTUNITY.**

### III. How do I handle conflict well?

- Honestly, there is so much Scripture and advice on this topic. When you take God at his word and do the things we are told to do, it helps us do conflict well.
- Step 1: Ask God for wisdom
- The goal is to honor God in conflict. We honor him when we serve others or grow to be more like him. If you start here, it will help give you the proper focus and perspective on the situation.
- Step 2: Begin with what's my fault  
*Matthew 7:4 How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.*
- We are lousy confessors. Avoid these words: "If", "But", "Maybe"
- "If I did that, I'm sorry . . ." "I'm sorry, but . . ."
- Be specific. Own it. Act like a grown up. Kids say, "It wasn't my fault." It is really tough to start with you when you feel like you are in the right.
- Examine honestly and confess responsibly.
- Step 3: Make the first move
- Conflict never heals itself – it is always intentional, The only way to resolve a conflict is to face it. Running from it or ignoring it NEVER makes it go away.
- My first move might be to overlook it, especially if it really doesn't matter.

- Go talk to them – IN PRIVATE. Don't tell your friend. We do more gossiping because we are asking for "advice" than you can imagine. Jesus says if it was your fault, go to them. If it was their fault, go to them.
- When you do, listen, ask questions. Try to see things from their perspective. Don't defend. Don't accuse.
- Step 4: Reconcile.
- Forgive. Which can take time, but is intentional. Once you forgive, stop dwelling on it. Don't bring it up or use it. Don't let it stand between you.
- When they have sinned against you more than you have sinned against the holy, loving God of the universe, then you can decide to not be reconciled.

- **EVERY CONFLICT IS AN OPPORTUNITY.**

- So know your tendencies. Understand your proclivities.
- Expect and decide that it can help you find freedom and make you better at living this life.
- Then jump all over this opportunity.
- If you ignored everything else in Scripture and loved each other in the same manner that Jesus loved you, it would take care of your conflicts.
- If you are not sure what that looks like, something like this might help. Print off these verses and run all your responses to conflict through these verses. Then align your words and actions to it. This would change your interactions.

*Ephesians 4:25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. 26 "In your anger do not sin" : Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 and do not give the devil a foothold. 28 Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need. 29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

- When we handle conflict poorly, it damages us. It damages those we care about the most.
- When we handle conflict well, it leads to life.
- **EVERY CONFLICT IS AN OPPORTUNITY.**
- An opportunity for increased freedom.
- An opportunity for joy.
- An opportunity to learn to worry less.
- An opportunity for deeper relationships.
- An opportunity to build stronger character and more confidence.
- An opportunity for us to be more effective.
- An opportunity to see Christ's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.
- Let's be a church that sees conflict for what it is – an opportunity to serve, love and grow so that we might be changed for the glory of God.