

SERMON TITLE: Words of Conflict

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SCRIPTURE: John 1:1-18

PASTOR: Jim Thompson

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Not a day goes by that we aren't shaped by words—words spoken to us, words on the news, words on social media, our own words. We're shaped by words because there is a mysterious and yet certain power in them. The Bible says that there is life and death in the power of the tongue. Words are used to build up and give life. Or, sometimes, they're used to tear down and take life. So, how can we be sure that we are speaking life to others? How can we avoid words that cut and tear down? How can we know we are honoring God with what comes out of our mouths? Answer: God himself is not silent. He is the God who speaks. In Scripture and ultimately in Jesus, we have God's holy communication to us. His word should be the primary thing that shapes our words so that others might find life in him.

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When Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers," he was inviting his followers to wisely use words to engage in healthy conflict resolution. So, what should that look like? Well, every conflict consists of two crucial realities, an issue and a relationship. Some people use their words in conflict in order to preserve the relationship, and they will back down on the issue to keep the relationship intact. And some people will go out of their way to win the other person to their issue, and they may even be willing for the relationship to take a hit so that their opinion on the issue is uppermost in the other person's mind. In all of this, there will be slight variations depending on whether the issue is political, theological, or financial, and depending on whether the relationship is your boss, your mom, or another student. But generally, people are either going to lean toward the preservation of the relationship or lean towards the upholding of the issue as they engage in conflict.

Scripture says that we should "speak the truth in love," but people who lean towards the issue may try to use the truth as a club. They say unhelpful things like, "You can't argue with the facts." Or, "Guess you'll have to get over it." Or, "It's not my fault you can't deal with reality." And talking like this in conflict – no matter the relationship – will belittle the relational intimacy and connection that God designed us for. For those that lean more towards preservation of the relationship, you're going to say things like, "It's ok, whatever you want." Or, "Oh no, that's fine. It doesn't matter." Or, "No problem, I don't care anyway." Or, perhaps worst of all, you won't say anything at all. And sometimes that can come from a place of fear, insecurity, or a denial of the reality of the issue.

As we face conflict and consider the words we use in conflict, the Bible's broad message to us is that more rides on our words than we could ever imagine, especially when they pass through the fire of conflict. So, what should we do? What does Christian conflict resolution entail? How do we think well about the issue and the relationship? Simply, what does healthy conflict look like for followers of Jesus?

John's intro to his gospel (John 1:1-18) might not seem like a passage about conflict resolution. And on one level, it isn't. In this text, there aren't details about how to navigate the layers of interpersonal struggles. But on another level, it's completely about conflict, the greatest conflict in the universe.. So, here's the first part of our answer...

The ultimate question is not, "How should I handle this conflict?" Rather, the ultimate question is, "How does God handle conflict?" And the answer is Jesus.

Likewise, the first practical question is not, "What words should I use in conflict?" Rather, we should first ask, "What words does God use in conflict?" And the answer is Jesus. He is God's Word in person.

This passage is about what God speaks in the conflict of light and darkness (1:5). He speaks a Word of life that is Jesus himself. Jesus is how God handles the biggest conflict of all, and because you can't do conflict without words, Jesus is called The Word. The implication is that we are already wrong if we enter into conflict trying to win or get something out of it. Those things aren't the starting point. We should enter conflict thinking, "God, what do you want to teach me in this? How do you want to grow me in this? How should my words point to you in this disagreement? How can I deal with this thing in a way that makes my own heart – and the hearts of others involved – pay more attention to Jesus since he is the Word that you speak to deal with the conflict of sin and death?" Your conflicts are not chiefly about you.

Of Jesus, John also says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:14). John did not say, "The Word became a voicemail that we could listen to." Or, "The Word became a letter from a far-country." Or, "The Word became a YouTube video that we could watch whenever." Thank God, the Word did not become a Zoom call we have to log in to. Rather, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." This means that when God speaks in conflict, he enters our mess. The incarnation of Jesus means he doesn't address our problems from a distance. He gets right in the middle of them to sense them and know them the way that we do. He's not scared to get his hands dirty. So,

Before it seeks to directly address an issue or appease a relationship, biblical conflict is incarnational and seeks to understand what others are thinking and feeling.

This is like the old prayer of Saint Francis prayer, "Lord, let me understand more than be understood." This is the truest form of resolving conflict, and it happens most purely when we are finding ways to enter the world, the pain, and the perspective of someone else rather than trying to bend their wills to adhere to our opinions. The true messiness of conflict is not the bickering, the name-calling, the yelling, and the belligerence. That's just a grown-up version of a child trying to get their way. The true messiness of conflict is the humility and sacrifice required to slowly enter someone else's world to grasp where they're coming from. This is exactly what Jesus did for us: "The word became flesh and dwelt among us."

What does this incarnational approach look like, and what does it have to do with our words? One implication here is that we have to become better question-askers so that we can see things from the other person's point of view. If you read the gospels, Jesus was a master question-asker. So, in order to really get a grip on where someone else is, we need to be artists at asking even-toned, open-ended questions. There are dozens of ways that these questions can sound, and it isn't always easy. But this question-asking approach is a way to practice the incarnation in the middle of conflict.

John continues, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only unique Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14, also see 1:17). So, when God handles conflict, he speaks Jesus. And as the Word-made-flesh, Jesus is full of grace and truth. And this is interesting wording. If every conflict includes an issue and a relationship, this description of Jesus seems to correspond. Every issue is a truth-claim, and every relationship at its purest is built on grace and love. Now we have to ask, "Where does God fall on the conflict resolution chart?" He deals with the issue AND preserves the relationship. Jesus is full of grace AND truth. This is the gospel: Did Jesus die for your sins, or to bring you to God? Yes, the issue and the relationship.

So, when we enter into conflict, and when we open our mouths to use words in conflict – the clarity and the life-changing power of the gospel are at stake. A gentle answer turns away wrath, and Jesus is that Gentle Answer, full of grace and truth. Jesus is God speaking the truth in love. It's not about who wins this round of family drama or workplace competition. This is about us feeling our constant need for the grace and truth of Jesus to flood all the friction in our lives, to energize all our words, and to be the source of all hope and peace when the mountain of conflict seems too tall to climb alone.

Practically, if you lean towards the truth side of things, you need to learn to do Colossians 4 and "let your speech always be seasoned with grace." If you lean more naturally towards the grace side of things, and you're scared that picking sides on an issue might offend someone, you have to trust Jesus that "the truth will set you free." No matter our most natural proclivity,

Learning to speak words of both grace and truth is how we submit all of our conflicts to God.

It takes two legs to walk on the tightrope of healthy, biblical conflict resolution that points to Jesus, and one of those legs is grace and the other is truth. And most importantly, living lives of grace and truth and speaking words of grace and truth is only possible as we completely depend on Jesus as the *source* of grace and truth. He is God's Speech in person. Jesus is the Word of Life and Light that has come to rescue us from the words of death and darkness spoken by the enemy. Jesus isn't a great idea that is distant from us. He is the Word made flesh that dwelled among us. He entered our mess and our pain, to fix our words and our hearts behind them. And Jesus showing up like he did is not about competition, accommodation, or compromise. It's about incarnation. He knows the conflict of sin and death at the deepest possible level. He passed through the fire of conflict for us. And because he is full of grace and truth, the supreme *issue* is not dismissed, and the supreme *relationship* is not forsaken. Jesus is God's Word that should shape our words, making the gospel the ultimate word we use.

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Discussion Starters —

1. What stood out to you most about this passage/message?
2. Which way do you most naturally lean in conflict - towards the issue or the relationship?
3. Name a time that you have misspoken in a conflict.
4. How does God handle conflict?
5. How should our words in conflict reflect the incarnation?
6. What should words of grace and truth sound like?
7. Who is someone you know whose words in fragile times reflect the grace and truth of Jesus?