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# Joy in Conflict and in Want

## Philippians 4:1-23

*Russ Kennedy*

The trouble with conflict:

When it is irreconcilable –when someone is simply wrong.

When it is divisive – when people are gathering up followings.

When it is personal – when what is valued is being challenged or taken.

So four questions to launch our thinking:

How do you handle conflict in your relationships?

How do you respond to difficult people?

What are your biggest difficulties in conflict?

How do you handle when a treasure (money, thing, position, ministry, agenda, identity) gets entangled in a conflict?

### **Relationships are to be Strengthened (v. 1-3)**

As Paul brings this book to close, he focuses in on the actual people involved in the partnership threatening conflict. He highlights our responsibility to help people who are in conflict.

#### **By Expressing our Love (v. 1)**

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

Three times in a single sentence, love for the people in the church is affirmed. In love for them, he calls all to please God in the midst of a situation where sin and self threaten the steady forward advance of the gospel. Paul is affirming his love even as he prepares to call names.

As those who are deeply loved, they are to stand firm. The sense here is of an ordered array like a military formation. They are standing firm in formation with godly leaders who have set them an example. They are standing firm in formation against the enemies of the cross, whose lifestyle and mindset are focused on and shaped by this present world. Do not abandon the formation to hit each other with your swords and shields – stand together knowing who the true enemies are. They are standing firm with all those heavenly citizens and like-minded servants, all who are enrolled in the book of life.

#### **By Helping People (v. 2-3)**

<sup>2</sup> I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. <sup>3</sup> 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.

Here Paul, from a distance, begins to launch resolving the personal conflict that threatened the partnership. Through patient appeals, he entreats each of these two ladies to have the same mind, the same attitude, the same orientation of the heart in the Lord.

While in a position to exercise authority, he chooses to appeal. Having laid a foundation of relational love and unity, he urges change. He does call names. We know the names of these two ladies. He has singled them out as the source of the conflict.

This will be accomplished close at hand by faithful helpers. In a curious turn of the language, this is a person's name that means "true or loyal yokefellow". A person or people who are partners together with Paul are to come alongside and facilitate the conflict resolution. These ladies have served well with Paul in the past standing in good formation with Clement and others who also are on the team, their names in the book of life.

### **Characteristics are to be Cultivated (v.4-7)**

So while the conflict is being wound down and unity being cultivated, what is to characterize all who are involved.

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; <sup>6</sup> do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

#### **Our Rejoicing in the Lord (v.4)**

We are to be a people whose joy is in the Lord. This is a command. This is what we are to do as we work at resolving conflict. Yet conflict often causes us to lose our joy. We are unhappy. We are sad, confused, downcast. Joylessness then becomes a symptom that conflict is going on. Yet, Paul seems to be calling us to gladness in our hearts and joy in the Lord even as we are in the process of reconciliation.

#### **Our Reasonableness before the Lord (v.5)**

We are to be a people who are known by our reasonableness. It is so easy to become hard, difficult and unreasonable in the midst of conflict. As a result, we are unable to see the other person's view. In the midst of conflict, be known as a sweetly reasonable and approachable person.

#### **Our Requests to the Lord (v.6)**

In the midst of conflict, because of the nearness of the Lord and the greatness of our burdens and anxieties, we must bring our petitions to the Lord. Here is another good verse with many wide applications yet often dragged, kicking and screaming out of its context. When is it most important that our bathed in gratitude prayers and supplications be made to the Lord? Precisely when conflict and relational difficulty is giving rise to anxieties and worries. In the midst of conflict, when worries and anxieties rise, speak to God about your requests with a heart full of gratitude.

#### **Our Rest from the Lord (v.7)**

Now, some of you have been wondering why in the world I am connecting verses 1-3 with verses 4-7. I do so because of the promise that is given here. The peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. It makes all the sense in the world. Work to help people resolve conflict. In the midst of resolving conflict, be this kind of person.

And, God's peace will defend your heart and mind from turmoil, anxiety, anger and further conflict.

### **Attitudes are to be Examined (v.8-9)**

<sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup> What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

We often think of this paragraph as a purity filter, lifting the text out of its context and never applying it to conflict. But the connection is there in verse 9. The God of peace will be alongside of us as we think and follow in ways pleasing to God in the midst of resolving conflict.

### **In What We Think (v.8)**

Before we examine this illustrative list of heart-talk guiding and guarding virtues, I want to address the last phrase first so that you will hear clearly what Paul is driving at.

Why does Paul choose these particular things as things to think about? He chooses these because of our sinful tendencies in the midst of conflict to listen to and think about the vices these virtues correct. Relational difficulties tend to provoke us and to tempt us into sinful thoughts. Therefore, notice the verb here – *think* on these things. In other words, be on guard against fantasizing, thinking about scenarios, self-talk about the person or around the situation. Watch replaying conversations and situations and rewriting the script. Watch for those thoughts that are planning what you are going to say or do – are those heart orientations and plans pleasing to the Lord?

All that follows does not exclude accurate assessment of sin, confrontation of evil thoughts and behavior. But even when we are admonishing others in the midst of conflict or disagreement, we must carefully guard our hearts and reflect the following as the primary flow of words in our hearts.

Think about what is true because our tendency is to listen to and to think about things that are not true.

Think about what is honorable because our tendency is to listen to and to think about things that dishonorable or disrespectful of those we are in conflict with. We delight in seeing or hearing or even putting them down ourselves.

Think about what is just because our tendency is to listen to and think about things that are not just or right about the person or situation. We tend to think in terms of vengeance and getting even. Our minds are filled with “striking-back” plans and hopes.

Think about what is pure because our tendency is to listen to and think about things that charge the person with sin. We also tend just to be sinful in our thoughts about the other person – wishing them evil.

Think about what is lovely because our tendency is to listen to and think about all the unlovely, displeasing things about the other person. We tend to focus on the warts, bumps, disfigurements so that we distort the person in our mind. We are thinking in caricatures, not in realities.

Think about what is commendable because our tendency is to listen to and think about all the things that we disapprove of and are not commendable in the situation or person. In order to justify our attitudes and actions, we focus on the negatives, failures, foolishness, ignorance, simplicity, silliness of the person.

Now, two overarching categories that are to guide and guard our thoughts in the midst of conflict.

Think about what is excellent, meaning **virtues** or moral excellence And think about things that are praiseworthy, meaning **values**, that is, to those things that reflect the work of God in the person and thus glorify God.

As we are working to resolve conflict, may we think on things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, therefore things that are full of value and virtue.

Finally, it is useful to use these as a guide and guard for our general thought life as well. After all, it is wrong to have a thought life filled with untrue, shameful, wrong, impure, ugly, contemptible, worthless, worthy to be condemned thoughts.

### **In Whom We Follow (v.9)**

So, who do you strive to be like in the midst of conflict? Who are your models, who do you seek to follow when you are struggling in marital or ministry conflict? Paul had taught and practiced all of these in the many conflicts that attended his ministry. His teaching and conduct are to be learned, observed, and practiced in the way wisdom dictates.

THE RESULT IS THE GOD OF PEACE WILL BE WITH US. It is plural here. Usually, Paul's use of the plural here is highlighting the corporate, community aspect. When people are pleasing to God in the midst of differences, debates and conflict, then the peace of God will guard individual hearts and minds and the God of peace will be face-to-face among the believing community.

### **Contentment is to be Developed (v.10-13)**

When is it hardest to be contented? When is it hardest to have broken relationships? In the same situations of hardship and difficulty. This is why Paul is going to take up this theme through the rest of the chapter. It appears that the issue that was threatening relationships was money. Is that any surprise?

<sup>10</sup> I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. <sup>11</sup> Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. <sup>12</sup> I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. <sup>13</sup> I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

### **Its Restored Concern (v.10)**

What a joy when people who have been struggling in a relationship now begin to really look the other person's interests first. The church's concern for the Apostle has found new life. This is not because their concern had died, but because they had no opportunity. But when an opportunity presented itself, they were quick to respond.

## **Its Difficult Challenge (v.11-12)**

Paul is careful in commending their giving to remind them of his difficult challenge. Remember where Paul is. He is dictating this letter in the darkness of a Roman prison or under house arrest. He is faced with the difficult challenge of deep personal and financial hardship. Yet, he does not see himself as “in need”.

Why? He has learned in every situation to be content. Whether he has little or has much, he has learned to be content. Contentment is essentially the sense of well-being that comes from being submitted to God’s providence and provision. This is a great challenge for us. We are often so discontent with our own situations. So let’s pause for a moment and think about these two sentences a bit.

<sup>11</sup> Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.

Paul is not opening this subject in order to talk about his needs. His appreciation for what they have done is simply a genuine thanksgiving. No other agenda is in play. Why? Because Paul does not think of himself as being “in need”. We might say, “in want”. He is not poverty stricken – at least not as he views himself.

How does one get to this amazing point? It was learned! Make no mistake, you do not wake up one day in the midst of plenty and the next in the midst of poverty and simply accept it. For most of us, there is a painful learning process that takes place. This is learning by experience, by practice. You cannot become content by simply reading Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. It is also learning through reflection. To simply go through financial hardship without serious personal and spiritual reflection *is not learning*.

So what is the effect of this experience of hardship and Biblical reflection that constitutes real “learning”? We know how to...

<sup>12</sup> I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

Just reflect on this sentence for a moment. “I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little.” [NLT] can you say this about yourself? Have you learned this by personal experience and by examination, by reality and reflection, so that it is true? Or is our reaction to financial hardship very different?

## **Its Biblical Confidence (v.13)**

What is then the secret that Paul has learned? In what is this Biblical confidence grounded?

<sup>13</sup> I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Surprised? Didn’t you expect it to be:

God will provide for me in every need...

By prayer God supplies my every need...

By faith God provides what I need...

The secret is that you can go through anything, good, bad, rich, poor, in plenty, in poverty, hungry, beaten, persecuted, imprisoned, through the One who strengthens you.

**It is *strength* that you must learn to have, not to have what you think you need.**

### **Relationships are to be Maintained (v.14-20)**

Godly leaders, even in the severest of trials, must seek to maintain relationships. Please do not hear in the following verses some strategy or agenda that makes the words manipulative. Rather, in sustaining the partnership there is a deep heartfelt gratitude for has been done in the past.

<sup>14</sup> Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. <sup>15</sup> And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. <sup>16</sup> Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. <sup>17</sup> Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. <sup>18</sup> I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. <sup>19</sup> And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. <sup>20</sup> To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

### **In a Sustaining Partnership (v.14-16)**

Here is the sweetness of a sustaining partnership. In the midst of his hardships and troubles serving the Lord, they moved to share in it. Lovely word here. They chose to enter into the *koinonia* the “fellowship” of his troubles.

How did they do that? By stepping forward when no one else would and supporting Paul. It was a risk. It was hard. They were identifying themselves with Paul. Yet, they saw this partnership as being important enough to begin a reciprocal giving and receiving. They gave financially, and he gave spiritually.

But why say, “even in Thessalonica”? Because there had been a lot of trouble in Thessalonica. After preaching the gospel and seeing many Jewish converts, they were dragged into the courts and eventually left the city hurriedly. Even when identifying themselves with Paul, the trouble-maker, might bring them trouble, they were willing to supply his ministry by sustaining their partnership.

### **With its Loving Characteristics (v.17-18)**

<sup>17</sup> Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. <sup>18</sup> I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

What love characterizes their relationship! Paul is not after their money. He is much concerned for what will be accounted to their credit. He is not looking for bonus points with him or with God. He is looking for fruit, for that harvest of righteousness that Jesus produces. He is looking for the results of his prayer in chapter 1:9-11.

Right giving always enriches the giver. But, that does not diminish in the least what they had done. Epaphroditus has delivered on their promise and on their provision. He has not only received every penny they gave, but it has “filled him up”. He is now, well supplied. Is it just that he has enough money now to get by? No, through their love and

the sending of their pastor, Epaphroditus, he is now strengthened for the hardships he is enduring.

As though that is not enough, he now lifts what they have given and removes the lid. He holds it up and waves it back and forth. From it breathes out a sweet smell. It is the fragrance of the incense of the sacrifice of Jesus. But even more, what they have given and what he has received is sweet and acceptable to God.

### **By a Supplying Promise (v.19)**

And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus. [NLT]

Having emptied themselves, they now will be filled by a supplying promise. Having been “well provided for by their gift” God will now “well provide from them out of His riches.” They have sown a seed of righteousness that will return its harvest. God will take care of them. It will be measured by the in-glory-riches of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If this promise is taken out of context then God simply has not kept it. There are many imprisoned (Cambodia) and impoverished (Sudan) Christians who believe this promise and still are in material want. So in what sense then is it true?

This promise is not merely material and may be primarily spiritual. It may well be that God may abundantly supply all we need in strength in order to bear up well in dire and dreadful circumstance.

God’s promises often have an “in glory” element. We do not get all the promise of the promises here and now. So true faith that believes this promise also bows to the providence of God to supply how, what and when according to His own good pleasure.

Christ’s in-glory-riches are the source and standard for what God will supply to His people in their need.

### **For Exalting Praise (v.20)**

Now all glory to God our Father forever and ever! Amen. [NLT]

In all this as in all things, we live for exalting God, for His praise and His glory. This is not just a Christian slogan. This is the reality true Christians aim for and hope in – that we will boast in God alone. Even when we are focusing on relationships and partnerships, we must have God’s glory and praise as our ultimate aim. This is truly what it means to rejoice, and again to rejoice in Christ.

### **Its Closing Greetings (v.21-23)**

<sup>21</sup> Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. <sup>22</sup> All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar’s household. <sup>23</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Greetings and grace – the letter closes. Say “Hello” to the believers, as we would say it. Say “Hello” to the saints. Funny how we don’t speak like this. We use other language directly from the Bible, why not this? Do you know with the possible exception of in James that Christians are only called saints, never sinners? Yes, people who are now saints, used to be sinners. But it is not my identity. I am, and you are a saint. You may be a saint that sins, but your identity is not “sinner”. Saints are not a special class of elevated and formally recognized Christians, rather all Christians are saints.

All that he has written is based on who they are and what God gives. They are saints. They are sanctified ones, holy ones, set-apart-from-sin ones. To do what they are becoming requires the grace of God. Human effort alone cannot produce God's true works. But the effort of the saints through the gracious power of God does produce God's true work.

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## **Reflect and Respond**

Resolving conflict God's way means:

Confronting the principals, helping people, developing a conflict-resolving character, thinking the right way and following the example of the right people.

The result? Peace between people, the peace of God in us and the God of peace among us.

Contentment and caring – where are you?

Is your soul calm and quiet before the Lord bowing to His providence and accepting His provision even in the midst of hardship?

Even in deep personal, financial, spiritual difficulty, will you love people so much that you will give to meet their needs?

May we echo with Paul:

At the moment I have all I need – and more! I am generously supplied [with what God has provided through others]. Those gifts are a sweet-smelling sacrifice that is acceptable and pleasing to God. And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus.

Now all glory to God our Father forever and ever! Amen.