

Resolving Conflict

Philippians 4:1-9

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This evening we're going to talk about a subject with which all of us struggle. And that topic is conflict. It doesn't matter who you are, a believer or an unbeliever. It doesn't matter whether you are a mother, father, son, daughter, employer, employee, or any other role in life; you will experience conflict.

What is conflict? For our discussion this evening we will define it as, "A difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone's goals or desires."

The Bible talks much about conflict. Yet the Bible does not teach that all conflict is bad. Some differences are natural and beneficial, while others can cause harm and discord. Our response to conflict often makes all the difference.

There are many reasons for conflict.

- Sometimes our sinful attitudes and desires lead us to sinful words and actions. James talks about this in chapter 4 and we will look at that later on this summer as we talk about anger.
- Sometimes we are just all competing over limited resources. Our intentions are good, there simply is not enough to go around.
- Often situations cause conflict as we saw when we studied the three trees and talked about the heat and dew that God brings into our lives.

Resolving Conflict

So where do we begin? Like all of the subjects we are discussing this summer, the proper starting place is to think biblically about conflict and about pursuing peace. There is a central truth about God we need to start with: our God is a God of peace, his son is the Prince of peace, and his spirit brings peace. And what has God done? He has made peace with us, he poured out his peace upon us and into us, and he calls and enables us to pursue peace with others.

The Bible links peace and God in a couple ways: there is the saving peace that God made with us at the cross, and the ongoing inner peace God gives us in our souls. These enable us to pursue relational peace with others in our life. And they guarantee us an endless life of future situational peace in the world to come.¹

Chapter 4 in the book of Philippians gives us helpful encouragement in dealing with interpersonal conflict. Turn there with me this evening.

Women played a significant role in the building of the church following Christ's resurrection. Euodia and Syntyche have obviously labored as "partners" (chapter 1) in the work at Philippi with Paul. In fact, he states here that they have labored (ESV), shared Paul's struggle (NASB), contended at his side (NIV) (fought – see 1:30) with him side-by-side in the gospel. So, these

¹ Robert Jones, *Pursuing Peace*, Crossway, pages 19-20.

women are solid Christians, their names written in the book of life. Yet these righteous women were in conflict so intense it was threatening the unity of the church and it was serious enough that Paul is calling them out as if he is speaking with them face-to-face.

The context follows that of Chapter 3, “Therefore” in 4:1. That focus was on their righteousness in Christ opposed to the evil with which they contended. The Philippians were reminded that even though they had lost much, their gain was Christ (3:7-8). And so, they were to continue to press on in imitating Paul and the other believers.

There is a repeated focus in these nine verses as Paul gives instructions to these questions, and to us, about resolving conflict. We see that focus in verses two, seven, and nine. And that focus is on peace. When we are in conflict with others, it seems like our natural tendency is to become argumentative and defensive. We want to stand our ground. We want to defend our position. And even worse, we want to defend our character.

Charles Spurgeon once wrote,

“Brother, if any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him; for you are worse than he thinks you to be. If he charges you falsely on some point, yet be satisfied, for if he knew you better, he might change the accusation, and you would be no gainer by the correction. If you have your moral portrait painted, and it is ugly, be satisfied; for it only needs a few blacker touches, and it would be still nearer the truth.”

In our defense, most of the time we would rather be right than be righteous. We would rather stand our ground, then be the ambassadors of reconciliation God has called us to be.

In verse three we see that Paul has brought in someone else to help counsel these women who were in conflict. He then gives all of them a list of characteristics for godly people in disagreements. **Look with me in the first three verses as we see the responsibility we have in helping others work through their differences.**

In verse one we see an incredible love that Paul has for his brothers and sisters in the church. It is because of this great love, that we have in fact seen throughout the entire book of Philippians, that motivates Paul to bring peace.

In verse two we see the appeal of Paul to these two women. He is urging them to be at peace, to agree in the Lord. This doesn't necessarily mean that they will agree on their differences. This is the idea that Paul has in Ephesians chapter 4 when he writes, “I 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.”

In verse three we see Paul bringing in outside help. And notice Paul is asking for help. Sometimes, our tendency is to gossip. Sometimes our tendency is to press for details. And, of course we need these details in order to, “pray intelligently” for those in conflict. We tend to distance ourselves from those in conflict. But this is not what Paul is asking for. Paul is asking for faithful men and women to come alongside and walk with those in the midst of conflict. Paul

is asking for helpers that will take God's side and bring the Scripture to bear in the lives of those in conflict.

In this specific case, Paul is exhorting them to resolve their conflict because they are Christians. Their names are written in the book of life. They must be reconciled because God has placed them both in the body, in the church. This is not the first time we've read this. This is the same idea that Paul has in 1 Corinthians when he exhorts those in that church not to take each other to court but to work out their differences. He tells the Corinthians it is to their shame that there is no one among you wise enough to help settle disputes between brothers.

Christians will disagree but we need to recognize our unity in Christ and work together to bring about resolution.

Concrete Steps to Resolve Conflict

The rest of our text this evening focuses on the concrete steps that we need to take to resolve conflict. Before we get there, however, I want to remind you of two basic principles as we evaluate ourselves in the midst of conflict.

The first is that we always remember that our goal in life, and certainly in conflict is to glorify God. 1 Corinthians 10:31 commands us that. "Whether we eat, or drink, or whatever we do, we do all to the glory of God."

I must always ask myself, "How can I glorify God in my response to this situation?" How can I show who he is, what he is like, and what he is doing, in the midst of this situation.

God is glorified when his people depend on and trust him, and obey his commands, even when it seems to put them at a disadvantage.

The second thing that we always remember is from Matthew chapter 7, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, let me take the speck out of your eye, when there is a log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brothers' eye."

- How can I show Jesus work in me by taking responsibility for my contribution to this conflict?
- How have I made this issue an idol?
- Where do I need to confess my sin and trust God alone for everything I need?
- How do I need to replace idol worship with worship of the true God?

Back to our text in verses four and five.

We need to develop an awareness of God

Rejoice in the Lord. In the midst of disagreement, we must continue to rejoice in God. Paul repeats himself here, I think, because it is so easy for us to forget this and become grumpy in the midst of conflict.

And be reasonable. We must be approachable. We must be calm. Especially when we remember what we have just talked about and our tendency to become hardhearted and defensive in the midst of the conflict. I wish I could say that I appreciated it when people confront me, but that is not always the case. What I do try and do, however, is to have an open heart and a sweet spirit, looking to see what I can learn from this confrontation.

When we are rejoicing in the Lord and are reasonable it shows that we are aware of God's goodness and care in our lives and understand that he is sitting with us right now in the room.

And then in verses six and seven Paul gives us an example of prayer in the midst of conflict. While our emotions run amuck, and we are worrying about the conversation, we are anxious about the outcome, we bring everything in a spirit of thanksgiving to God. This seems so counterintuitive. How can God expect us to come to him with thanksgiving in the midst of stress, turmoil, and conflict?

We come with thanksgiving for at least two reasons.

1. We realize that all things work together for good to those who are in Christ. And so we can be assured that even through the difficulties of the situation, God is conforming us more and more to the image of Jesus and in that he will be glorified.
2. Verse seven makes it clear that we can be thankful because God's peace guards our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. This outward conflict does not have to produce inward turmoil. And while we may not understand it, it is an incredible supernatural peace.

In verse eight then Paul gives us the principles by which we should focus our mind. What is the biblical way to think about this conflict? Paul makes it very clear in verse eight.

In speaking of this verse one author writes the following,

In the context, these are the way we ought to think about others. We often are tempted to think wrongly about others. So, first, let me turn this around and expose how we often think in the midst of differences and conflict. We entertain thoughts that are untrue, false, dishonorable, unjust, unwholesome, ugly, shameful, mean, frivolous –anything that is demeaning and detrimental.

- True: Guard against untrue, dishonest and unreliable thoughts about others.
- Honorable: Noble, dignified, not attributing dishonorable or lowly motivations
- Just: Righteous, not attributing unjust, unfounded accusations or charges
- Pure: Wholesome, not attributing immoral or impure motives
- Lovely: Not thinking ugly, corrosive, destructive thoughts

- Commendable: Thoughts that are approved by all, that would not be shameful if visible to all
- Excellent: Thoughts that would be characterized as full of virtue
- Praise-worthy: Thoughts that would affirmed as admirable²

And finally, in verse nine we see the biblical action that follows the awareness of God, biblical prayer, and biblical thinking.

These are things that we practice.

We all need godly examples. Dwight Pentecost once wrote, “In Scripture, a man who knows what he ought to do and does not do it is called a hypocrite. The sin of hypocrisy is constantly dealt with as one of the cardinal sins with which believers must come to grips. It is that which the apostle has uttermost in his mind as he pens the words of Philippians 4:9.”³

On the other hand, the one who knows what he ought to do and follows a godly example is called a disciple. Paul is calling the Philippians to practice discipleship. Indeed, almost everything that we consider to be side-by-side ministry to one another is actually a form of discipleship.

The disciple is actually a learner. The idea of learning has the basic meaning of directing one’s mind to something and producing an external effect. Paul is calling the Philippians to genuinely understand and accept his teaching, to accept it is true and to apply it to their lives. Much in the same way we might work to develop a lifelong habit.

Receiving truth should always accompany learning truth. It’s one thing to learn a fact, but quite another to receive it inwardly and take it to ourselves so that it becomes a part of our heart.

And the result is clear here, the God of peace will be with you. Robert Jones writes, “If God himself is filled with peace (and he is), and if we are connected to him by faith (and we are), then we can and will experience this inner peace in all its fullness. Here Paul echoes the promise of our Lord Jesus, “peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27).”⁴

As J. I. Packer puts it, “There is no peace like the peace of those whose minds are possessed with full assurance that they have known God, and God has known them, and that this relationship guarantees God’s favor to them in life, death, and on forever.”⁵

Reflect and Respond

Conflict always provides the believer an opportunity.

- An opportunity to glorify God by believing, trusting, obeying, and honoring Christ

² Russ Kennedy, *Family Talk on Conflict*, February 2004

³ Dwight Pentecost, *The Joy of Living: A Study of Philippians*, Kregel Publications (October 11, 1996)

⁴ Robert Jones, *Pursuing Peace*, Crossway, pages 25-26.

⁵ J.I Packer, *Knowing God*, IntersVarsity Press, page 26.

- An opportunity to serve others by bearing their burdens or by confronting them in love
- An opportunity to grow in Christlikeness by confessing sin and turning from attitudes that promote conflict

God's response to our sin is the Gospel. God bears with our sin with great patience (Ps. 103:10-18; Rom. 9:22-24), offering and securing for us eternal forgiveness in spite of our many offenses against him. The cost for this mercy was immeasurably great, however. God sent his Son to serve both as a mediator (1 Tim. 2:5) and as our substitute to work out a resolution to the greatest conflict the world has ever known. Jesus willingly went on trial in our place, was convicted for our sins (2 Cor. 5:21), and suffered the flogging, death, and separation that we deserved (Mark 15:34). The Gospel is the most wonderful response to conflict that has ever occurred, but to bring it about, Jesus had to endure the most painful response to conflict that could ever be imagined.