

Managing Conflict

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1-18-09

Introduction.

- A. One of the more broad-based instructions in the entire Bible appears in Romans 12:18. Just as God is a God of peace, just as the gospel is a gospel of peace, so too as Christians we are to be a people of peace. This imposes behavior on us that is often in stark contrast to the way that people in the world act. One of the men I worked with during law school was the perfect example of the way that Christians **SHOULDN'T** behave. A professor he didn't like or the slightest setback in what we were doing would be more than enough to send him into a profanity-laced tirade. One time, he was walking along the river that runs through Austin, got a call on his cell phone that he didn't appreciate, and concluded the call by throwing the phone into the river.
- B. Hopefully, none of us have quite that much trouble being peaceful, but all of us will admit that there are times when peace is easy to understand, but hard to put into practice. Sooner or later, just about all of us manage to get crossways with somebody, or have somebody get crossways with us. Conflicts like this can appear in just about any area of our lives: in our families, in our friendships, in our workplaces, and in our churches.
- C. Oftentimes, these conflicts emerge over things that would seem silly five years down the road, but their results can be anything but funny. Disagreement can take on a life of its own, so that some ridiculous little dispute ends up leading to a divorce or a church split. Worst of all, of course, is the fact that when we are not behaving like men and women of peace, we are not pleasing God. We need to learn, then, how to keep our peace intact through all the collisions of life. Let's look this morning at the Bible take on managing conflict.

I. Initial Stages of Conflict.

- A. One of the first things, and perhaps the most important thing, that we need to do as we manage conflict is to **BE HONEST**. Obviously, this needs to start with what we say. In the long term, lies and deception do nothing to improve our relationship with anybody. Less obvious but just as important, though, is the need to be honest with ourselves. Along these lines, consider the words of David in Psalm 15:1-2. God prizes an honest heart, and so should we. Honesty with ourselves is often difficult. Whenever we're angry at someone, or they're angry at us, our initial presumption is that we're right and they're crazy. Some people take this to such extremes that their lives are one long chronicle of injury, that no matter how obviously responsible they are for the mess they're in, it's always somebody else's fault. Brethren, we need to be the opposite. This doesn't mean that we should assume that we're always wrong and the other person is always right. That isn't any more helpful than assuming we're always right. Instead, what we need to do is take ourselves out of the equation. We need to ask ourselves, "If this were an argument between two total strangers, what would I think about it?" At least in my experience, it's quite rare for one person to be totally right and the other to be totally wrong. Usually, there's some truth to both sides of the argument, but we're so caught up in defending our truth and refuting theirs that we don't see it. When we take that step back, though, it becomes much easier to see where the other guy's coming from and acknowledge that he might have a point about something. Only as we do that can we resolve our conflicts in the most effective way.
- B. Also, it's critically important that we **SPEAK SOFTLY**. Look at what Solomon tells us about this in Proverbs 15:1. I suspect that this is a familiar verse to many of us, and it's not hard to understand. However, it is hard to put into practice. When our spouses, our co-workers, or our friends come to us speaking harshly in an angry tone, our natural human inclination is to reply to them in the same way. The problem is, though, that once we start replying in kind, the person on the other end thinks that we're not listening to him, and so his next words are even harsher and even angrier. Our next reply also ups the intensity, and soon the entire argument spirals out of control. On the other hand, though, when we respond to immediate anger with calmness, that makes us seem more reasonable and more open to a discussion, even when we aren't mentally there yet. It changes the discussion from an attempt to win an argument to an attempt to solve a problem.
- C. Naturally, when we're the ones who are bringing up a grievance of ours, we're going to do much better too when we begin with a calm and reasoned approach. That predisposes the other person not to get his guard up, but to listen. If we're spoiling for a fight, that might not be what we want, but if we're looking to resolve our dispute in a godly, peaceable manner, calmness from the other is exactly what we need to see.
- D. Similarly, we should always seek to **SPEAK LOVINGLY**. We see Paul encouraging this kind of behavior in Ephesians 4:15. Not everything we have to say in a conflict is going to be pleasant to hear. We may need to point out problems with the other's behavior that are going to be painful to hear about and difficult to fix. However, as we speak the truth, we need to do it with love. Ultimately, friends, whenever we criticize another, we should be seeking not our good, but theirs, and the way we present the truth to them should make that clear. We need to remember that the person on the other side of the argument was created in the image of God too, that he is precious in the sight of his Creator, and that we should treat him accordingly. He's not just

some bit player in the grand saga of our lives; he's just as important as we are. If that's truly our attitude, if we are thinking and speaking with love, it will transform what we say, and it will transform the way we say it.

- E. Sometimes, though, the best thing that we can do in mid-argument is not to say anything at all. Sometimes, the best thing we can do is to **LISTEN**. Look at the exhortation that James gives us about this in James 1:19. Nor is this just any kind of listening. Some people listen when they're arguing in a way that reminds me of my debater days back in high school. Back then, when I was in a debate, and my opponent was speaking, I would keep what was called a flow pad of the debate. On that pad, I would write down every argument that the other guy made, but I only did that so I could remember everything he said to refute it in my next speech. Too often, I think, when we're in a conflict with somebody, we only listen to them to update our mental flow pad, to find the flaws in their argument without regard for whether they have a point or not. That's a useful strategy if we're trying to win a debate by convincing a neutral judge, but it's a lousy way to find common ground with someone who disagrees with us. They feel like we're just dismissing everything they have to say to score points, and in reality, they're exactly right. Instead, we need to really listen, to pay attention to what the other guy's saying, not so we can defeat it, but so we can make it part of our understanding.
- F. Throughout this entire process, though, we need to **CONTROL OUR ANGER**. This too is much more easily said than done. When someone has done something that has offended us, or has come to us complaining of our conduct, it's really, really easy to feel like it's our innermost souls that are under attack. We feel like the other guy is painting us as a worthless person. We don't like the idea that we're worthless, and so we feel compelled to defend ourselves with self-righteousness and rage. The problem is that God commands us to do precisely the opposite. Look at the rest of the Scripture we just finished reading, in James 1:19-20. This idea, that the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God, is something that we must keep in mind through any conflict. We feel like we're totally right and they're totally wrong. We feel like it's our duty to stick it to the other guy with every word we utter. The problem is, friends, that we're never totally right. Even if we were, selfishness and anger never pleases God. He doesn't rejoice to hear us defend ourselves by spouting all sorts of cruel, hurtful words. That's not righteousness. That's sin. In all my life, folks, there has never been a time when I angrily said something in an argument, and was glad I did later, and there's never been a time when I controlled my anger, that I was sorry I did later. Let's be wise and stay calm.

II. Resolution of Conflict.

- A. Sadly, some people are so caught up in being right, or so fearful of conflict, that they never really look to solve the issues that they have with another. Sometimes, they let the pressure build up inside themselves until finally they explode; at other times, they carry a grudge until it dies of old age, and then have it stuffed, mounted, and hung over the fireplace. Neither one of those things is godly. Instead, we should **SEEK RESOLUTION**. Along these lines, consider Paul's words in Ephesians 4:26. I don't believe that this is meant to be taken literally, that as soon as the sun slips below the horizon, we'd better stop being angry, or else. Instead, Paul is urging us to confront our anger as quickly as possible. If we've got a problem with somebody else, the best thing we can do is present that problem in a loving, honest way. Otherwise, if we attempt to mask our anger, or worse yet, nurture it, it's going to eat us up from inside and make opportunity for Satan.
- B. Sometimes, when we seek resolution of the problem we have with somebody else, that resolution doesn't work out in our favor. Sometimes, when we're listening to the complaint that the other guy has against us, we hear a little voice inside our heads that says, "He's right." When that's so, we need to be honest and up-front and **ADMIT WRONG**. God loves to see us reconciled with other people. Along these lines, look at Jesus' advice to the Jews in Matthew 5:23-24. This is no small thing that Jesus is asking. It was a big deal for the Jews to present their sacrifices at the temple. It was expensive, and it required the participation of a lot of priests and Levites. Jesus tells them to bring that whole complex process to a screeching halt if they need to make things right with a person they've wronged. Our sense of personal accountability needs to be that tender too. Even though we know we're not perfect, we like to pretend we are to others. We hate to admit that we're wrong, and some folks will go to extreme lengths to avoid it. We can't be like those people. Instead, we have to make seeking forgiveness our first priority. If we caused the problem, it's up to us to make things right.
- C. Finally, though, when the shoe is on the other foot, when someone else admits to us that they've done wrong, we need to **FORGIVE**. Paul makes this pretty plain in Colossians 3:13. It seems like forgiveness would be the easiest part of an argument. After all, when our spouse or our friend comes to us and says, "I really messed up; please forgive me," it doesn't diminish us in any way to grant that forgiveness. However, sometimes, we get so caught up in the self-righteousness of being right that we don't want to let it go even when the person on the other side admits he was wrong. We feel like he's getting off too easy with just an apology. In our heart of hearts, we want to do something to him that will hurt him just as much as he hurt us. The problem with that way of thinking is that it forgets the grace of God. All of us have sinned against Him. All of us have hurt Him more than we can know. And yet, God gave His Son to die for us so that He could offer us forgiveness. When God has forgiven us so much, friends, how can we refuse to forgive so little?

Conclusion. If you would like God's forgiveness, it's available to you today through the blood of Jesus Christ.