

“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

Romans 12:18

Introduction

Benjamin Franklin, who borrowed a quote from Christopher Bullock, is widely credited with uttering the saying, “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”

The truth, though, is that there is also a third certainty in this world – conflict. Here are the facts.

Conflict is everywhere.

It’s all around us, each and every day. There are conflicts at home, at work, and at school. There are conflicts in marriages and in families. Conflicts between friends, between strangers, between co-workers, and between competing companies. There are domestic conflicts, international conflicts, political conflicts, financial conflicts, racial conflicts, gender conflicts, and yes, even church conflicts. You can’t get away from conflict!

Conflict is inevitable.

Anytime two or more people live together, work together, play together, or just spend time together, you can count on the fact that there will eventually be conflict of some type that arises. Because of our God-given diversity, there will always be others who find your goals, beliefs, ideas, desires, or opinions to conflict with theirs.

Conflict is potent.

Some conflicts are relatively minor and short-lived, while many other conflicts start as small sparks and eventually ignite into volatile and long-lasting firestorms that can consume and devastate everything in their path. If left unchecked, conflict can tear apart the fabric of a family, a friendship, a partnership, or even a church, from top to bottom. At the same time, though, conflict also presents powerful opportunities to strengthen important relationships, to stimulate dialogue, and to promote helpful and necessary change. And most importantly for Christ-followers, conflict provides a potent opportunity to exalt God and to demonstrate the love and power of His Son in our lives.

As we’ll discover in this week’s focus on the topic of Peacemaking, conflict doesn’t necessarily have to be destructive or painful. It doesn’t always have to ruin relationships or devastate the unity of a church body. This week will show us that, when approached biblically, conflict can turn even the most challenging relationships into peaceful ones.

Group Video Discussion

Watch Video 3 How to make right what's wrong

Your notes:

Resolving conflict with fellow Christ-followers requires:

1. The right _____

2. The right _____

3. The right _____

4. The right _____

Questions for Group Discussion

1. How do you typically approach conflict with other believers?
2. How might unresolved conflict between Christ-followers affect an individual church body or the Christian community as a whole?
3. What role did Paul want Clement and the rest of Paul's fellow workers to take in the dispute between Euodia and Syntyche? Have you ever taken on a similar role in helping others work through a disagreement? What was the most challenging part about taking on that role?
4. Immediately after calling these women out publicly for their dispute, why do you think Paul then chose to commend them and to mention the fact that their names are listed in the book of life?
5. After reflecting upon this passage, what would you say is God's ultimate goal for conflict? (You can refer to 1 Corinthians 10:31, Romans 8:28-29, Ephesians 4:12-16, and John 15:1-5 for some ideas.)

Personal Daily Devotions

Day 15

Before you deal with the problem

*“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do,
do it all for the glory of God.”*

1 Corinthians 10:31

Whenever you find yourself in a conflict of any kind, it's human nature to quickly become defensive, to think of ways to get even with the one who hurt you, or to try to get your own way. But usually such thinking only escalates the conflict, produces bitterness, or leads you to make rash or foolish decisions.

1 Corinthians 10:31, however, gives Christ-followers a completely countercultural way of viewing conflict. Instead of looking at conflict as a personal inconvenience or as a reason to lash out and hurt others or have your own will done, this verse reminds us that conflict can and should be viewed as an opportunity to honor and bring glory to God. It's an opportunity to draw attention to God's character: His infinite mercy; His steadfast love; His matchless power; His gracious forgiveness. It's an opportunity to give the watching world a visible and tangible example of how the Gospel of Jesus Christ – the good news of what God has done to reach us and forgive us through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son – changes our lives and our hearts and how we respond when conflicts come our way.

One of the best ways you can glorify God when you're in a conflict is to lean not on your own understanding and limited perspective, but instead to trust and rely upon the fact that God will direct your path (Proverbs 3:5-6). You can trust that God will show you how to approach trials and painful disagreements. You can trust that God will provide you with what you need along the way. You can trust that He understands your hurt and knows your deepest pain. You can trust that God hears your prayers for resolution and for justice. You can trust that God can perform miracles in your circumstances in spite of seemingly insurmountable odds. And you can trust that, even if things don't turn out the way you hope or plan, He loves you unconditionally and settled that once and for all when He sent His Son to die for you.

So the next time you're in a conflict, instead of seeking to stick it to your opponent, start by asking God, “Father, how can I best please and glorify you in this challenging situation? How can I show the love of Jesus to those around me? And how can I respond in such a way that will let others see the Gospel on display in my life?”

Your Personal Reflection and Application

How do you usually respond to conflict with other believers? What are typically your primary goals when you find yourself in a dispute?

What is encouraging to you as you think about conflict as an opportunity for glorifying God? What scares or frustrates you about this thought?

Do you think the notion of seeking to glorify God in conflicts is impractical or unrealistic? Why or why not?

How might focusing on the good news of the Gospel in the midst of conflicts help you?

Think about a conflict you're currently facing, possibly with another believer. From this point on, how could you glorify God through this circumstance? Be as specific as possible.

Write a simple prayer below that expresses how you want to view or approach a current or future conflict.

Day 16

When You've Been Wronged (Part 1)

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 4:31-32

In this fallen world, forgiveness is absolutely essential to maintaining close relationships. Sometimes we can simply overlook an offense and make an intentional choice to not dwell on it, talk about it, or let it fester anymore. But the deeper you've been hurt and the more betrayed, mistreated, abused, or stepped on that you feel – especially if it comes from someone particularly close or important to you – the more difficult it is to forgive.

Today's passage, though, gives us valuable guidance about how to proceed when you've been wronged by someone. It says we need to begin by getting rid of certain things:

- **Bitterness:** Resentment that refuses to let go of a grudge against someone who has hurt you.
- **Rage:** Explosive outbursts of anger, whether expressed through our words or actions.
- **Anger:** Unrighteous, premeditated anger that savors the satisfaction of making people pay over a long period of time.
- **Brawling:** Abusive language and raised voices.
- **Slander:** Destructive and typically dishonest speech that demeans the other person.
- **Malice:** Bearing ill will and actively seeking to bring harm to another.

This passage is a clear reminder that when you've been wronged as a Christ-follower, you need to actively seek to get rid of every one of these attitudes listed above, with no exceptions. Why? Because they are toxic enemies of peace and only bring about suffering and ultimately death to relationships and Christian unity.

On the other hand, there are some additional things we are called to "put on" when we've been wronged:

- **Kindness:** The opposite of malice, it desires and strives to bless the other person, even when he or she has purposefully sinned against you.
- **Compassion:** Genuinely caring about, empathizing with, and seeking the good of the other person.
- **Forgiveness:** Consciously deciding to not hold something against another person; the complete dismissal of all charges.

These last three things may seem impossible or even, from a worldly perspective, signs of weakness. But Paul calls us to respond to conflict in these three ways because our forgiveness and love for others is motivated by God's forgiveness and love for us. In other words, God's forgiveness in Christ sets the standard for our forgiveness of others. And since God's forgiveness is total and complete, He wants ours to be as well when someone wrongs us.

Your Personal Reflection and Application

How big a problem would you say things like bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, or malice are in local churches today? How about between churches? Or in Christian families? Specifically, how do you see these attitudes manifested?

Do you feel it's possible for there to be unity in a church or among Christ-followers when they are filled with bitterness, strife, or unforgiveness toward each other?

What messages might these unrighteous attitudes in believers send to the unbelieving world?

Do you feel it's hypocritical to be kind and forgiving towards someone who hurts you when what you really feel like doing is seeing them suffer for what they've done? Why or why not?

In what ways does God's forgiveness provide you with a picture of how He wants you to forgive others?

Day 17

When You've Been Wronged (Part 2)

*But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies,
do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you,
pray for those who mistreat you.*

Luke 6:27-28

While yesterday's Scripture passage was challenging enough to consider and apply, Jesus himself also spoke clearly to the issue of how His followers were to respond when they've been wronged.

1. **Love your enemies.**
2. **Do good to those who hurt you.**
3. **Bless those who curse you.**
4. **Pray for those who mistreat you.**

In other words, regardless of how long your list of "enemies" may be, or how badly they've wronged you, Jesus says, "Here is how I want you to respond to them."

Seriously? How are you supposed to actually *love* your enemies? And why *should* you love them or do good for them or bless them? After all, you say, look at all the damage they've caused in your life! It's one thing to possibly consider loving and forgiving and praying for somebody who comes to you humbly repentant and begging for mercy. But what about those enemies who have not changed and are still the same people who hurt you in the first place?

In spite of our excuses and justifications, though, Jesus still says, "Love. Do good. Bless. Pray"

There are obviously no guarantees that your act of loving and doing good to those who hate you will bring about a change in your enemy's heart. But our job is not to change our enemies. Only God can do that. Our job as Christ-followers is simply to follow Jesus and to do what He directs us to do – even when it doesn't make sense.

Are these commands an indication that God actually endorses the hurtful things people do to you? Absolutely not, but they do send a message that God has a plan for your response when people hurt you, and His perfect plan will take you beyond that hurt to a place of healing and growth in your life. And it may even have an impact on those who have hurt you.

The only way it is possible to reach the place where you can actually love your enemies is to realize that you can't do it in your own strength. You need to call upon God's supernatural power to intervene in your circumstance. And then you must return time and time again to God's extraordinary Gospel. To love your enemies as Christ loved you is to believe that no one is beyond the grace of God, that every single person who has ever or will ever live is on the same footing before God as sinners. It is only through Jesus' death and resurrection that anyone – including *you* – is able to be reconciled to Him.

Your Personal Reflection and Application

Jesus teaches us to love our enemies with our words, our actions, and our prayers. Which of these is the most difficult for you?

Why do you think God even cares if we love our enemies or not?

Have you ever felt, or do you now feel, that someone within the Body of Christ is your enemy? Is that possible? Explain.

What role might these commands play in the larger context of Jesus' prayer that His followers be perfectly one?

Are you presently seeking to love an enemy? If so, what are you doing to express your love for him or her?

Day 18

When You've Wronged Someone

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

Matthew 5:23-24

Did you notice that Jesus makes an important distinction in these verses? He says "if...your brother or sister has something against *you*."

On the surface, this seems like Jesus is once again saying something unreasonable. Are we actually supposed to be responsible for all of the grudges and anger and enmity that people may feel against us? After all, as Christ-followers, we are called to speak truth and to live as salt and light in a dark world (Matthew 5:13-16), and doing so will, quite frankly, always offend at least a few people, right? Even within the Body of Christ.

But take a closer look at verses 23-24 within the context of the verses that immediately come before them. Jesus seems to be making two important points here.

1. We are responsible for what others hold against us when we have sinned against them or wronged them in some way. And this command is not limited to situations when the person you have offended or hurt has something justifiable against you. Jesus' words imply that the obligation to initiate reconciliation exists *whether or not* you believe the other person's complaint is legitimate.
2. We are responsible for pursuing reconciliation, so far as it depends upon us. Reconciliation may not actually take place in the long run, and not everyone with whom you seek to reconcile will accept your gesture, but the main idea is that we must take whatever steps are necessary to go and to try to make matters right with those whom we have hurt or offended. We can't control and are not responsible for every single outcome, but we *are* responsible for owning up to our role in conflicts.

God wants us to take the initiative in seeking peace as soon as possible. He calls us to humble ourselves and be people who long for restitution, reconciliation, and peace in our relationships – especially within the Body of Christ - as far as it depends upon us (Romans 12:18).

Your Personal Reflection and Application

Why do you think Jesus is so concerned that reconciliation and apologies be made quickly?

Are there any situations that we shouldn't try to resolve as Christ-followers? Or that we can't resolve?

With whom do you need to stop what you're doing right now and "go and be reconciled"?
What specific steps do you need to take?

Day 19

Speaking the Truth when Dealing with Conflicts

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Ephesians 4:15

Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

Ephesians 4:25

The wisdom of “speaking the truth in love” and “speaking truthfully to your neighbor” when you’re trying to work through a relational challenge makes a lot of sense when you stop to think about it. You’ve probably learned from your own personal experiences that difficult things are often better heard and more readily received in loving, non-threatening environments.

So, why don’t we do this more often when we’re facing conflicts with other believers? Maybe because speaking the truth can be a lot harder than it seems! That’s why we often stuff our feelings and pretend that everything is fine when it’s really not. It’s the reason we avoid saying what really needs to be said. After all, it’s risky to speak the truth. It’s risky to be vulnerable and to express your honest feelings. It’s risky to confront. It’s risky to potentially say something in the wrong way or in a way that could offend the other person.

So why take the risk of speaking the truth? The verses above give us two great reasons:

1. Because you love the other person. An honest conversation or an honest answer is a sign of genuine, Christ-like love. The “love” referred to in verse 15 is agape love, the self-sacrificial love that works for the benefit of the loved one. It’s the same word that describes Jesus’ love for you as expressed on the cross. So, when you take the risk of speaking the truth, being authentic, and opening your heart out of love for the other person – no matter who it is – you open the door for the possibility of God’s love becoming more real to the other person and the possibility of fostering deeper understanding, deeper healing, and deeper empathy in that relationship.
2. Because you care about unity in the Body of Christ. In the context of the rest of Ephesians 4, the apostle Paul reminds his readers that, as Christ-followers, we all serve the same God and are part of the same Body. And God’s desire is that His Body be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of His Son (Ephesians 4:13). God’s intention is that we become more mature followers – both individually and corporately – rather than being spiritually immature and easily deceived. Putting off falsehood and speaking truthfully in love to one another is what fosters that type of unity and maturity.

Truth and love go hand-in-hand, and because we know the truth, we should be people characterized by love and an earnest desire to see Jesus’ prayer in John 17 for His followers realized.

Your Personal Reflection and Application

When someone within the church needs to be confronted, do you have a harder time speaking the truth at all, or speaking the truth in a kind and loving way?

In what ways could *not* speaking the truth be harmful to the other person? To the Body of Christ?

What might speaking the truth in love actually look like on a practical level (e.g., in a conflict)?

Is there a conflict with another believer that you're ignoring or pretending isn't really that big of a deal? Are you sweeping your true feelings under the rug? How can you take the risky step of speaking the truth in love in that situation?

Day 20

Speaking the Right Words at the Right Time

*The right word at the right time is like a custom-made piece of jewelry,
and a wise friend's timely reprimand is like a gold ring slipped on your finger.*
Proverbs 25:11-12

Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.
Proverbs 12:18

How would someone describe your words when you're in a conflict? Would they describe them as wise, timely, or helpful? Or would they describe them as reckless, misplaced, or like a sword?

Our words – especially when we're dealing with a delicate relational matter – carry great weight. They can bring healing and peace, or they can stir up more trouble and cause deep wounds.

This means that there is really no such thing as a neutral word.

Your words have direction to them. They are either moving in the direction of giving life and encouragement, or they are moving in the direction of condemnation, division, and death. That's why it is so crucial that we rely on the Holy Spirit to lead us to speak the right words in the right way and at the right time.

Knowing what to say is one thing. Knowing what to say *and* when to say it is another. When we say the right thing at the right time, it adds value to the relationship, facilitates understanding, and increases the likelihood that the other person will be open to hearing what we have to share.

So how do we know what to say and when to say it? James 1 has two practical suggestions:

1. Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry (James 1:19). When you speak hastily or in anger instead of choosing your words and timing wisely, it is unlikely that what you say will be conveyed in a gracious manner that communicates God's love.
2. When you need wisdom from God about how and when to communicate, you should simply pray and ask Him (James 1:5). After all, nobody knows the right words and the right time like God!

How many of our conflicts would decrease or never even materialize if we listened before we spoke? If we waited to confront or to challenge the other person until after we've prayed and asked for God's wisdom? If we responded to the person with whom we disagree with gracious words that aim for truthful restoration and agreement and peace?

Your Personal Reflection and Application

When have another person's words deeply wounded you? What impact did those words have on your life?

When have your words deeply wounded someone? What impact did those words have on that person?

How did the hurtful things that were said affect your relationship with that person?

How might today's Scripture passages help you as you consider working through your relational conflicts with other believers within the church?

Day 21

When to Ask for Others' Help

If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Matthew 18:15-17

When consistently applied, the biblical principles for handling disputes that we've looked at so far this week will, more often than not, move us further down the road toward maintaining harmony in our relationships with other Christ-followers. However, because of our sinful nature, conflicts can occasionally escalate, making it necessary to bring in others to help us in our pursuit of peace.

Today's verses give us several practical guidelines for how to proceed when a situation has gone beyond a simple disagreement and someone has sinned against you:

1. An offended person should first approach the offender one-on-one in order to show him or her their fault. The purpose of this step is to hopefully win the other person over. Every effort should be made to preserve the dignity of the other person. This formula tells us to start with only the two people who are directly involved in the problem, increasing that number *only if* the offender refuses to listen and repent.
2. If a private discussion between the two of you does not solve the issue, a Christian is to take one or two other believers and meet with the offender.
3. If the offender still refuses to listen, then the matter is to be brought before the church.
4. Lastly, if the offender still refuses to repent even when the entire congregation is involved, the church is called upon to put that individual out of the fellowship, thus removing the negative influence from the congregation.

Applying this formula can obviously be an emotionally charged experience. That's why so few believers or churches approach conflict in this way. However, it is important to remember that the goal of the formula is not to punish or to exact retribution. Rather, it is for the purpose of:

- Repentance: To see the offender turn from wrongful behavior.
- Redemption: To bring the offender into a right relationship with God.
- Restitution: To bring justice where someone suffered wrong.
- Restoration: To reestablish fellowship and unity.

We must never forget that the Body of Christ is not a fellowship of sinless people. We are a community of deeply flawed but forgiven sinners who, by God's grace, are called to continually and intentionally pursue a life of holiness and obedience to the Lord as well as peace and unity with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. The Gospel of Jesus Christ compels us to keep working toward the goal of unity. Because we have been forgiven by God and restored to relationship with Him, we must never tire of forgiving one another, humbly repenting before one another, and seeking to repair and restore our relationships with one another. It is through this mutual love and radical sacrifice that the world will see more clearly who Jesus is.

Your Personal Reflection and Application

How do you know when to confront a believer who sins against you? Since we're all sinners in process, what sins need confrontation?

Why is it essential to first try to handle disputes one-on-one? From your experience, do Christ-followers typically apply this principle?

How would you answer the objection that the formula Jesus prescribes is out-of-date or unrealistic or might offend or drive others away?