

Becoming a Peacemaker Series

Jesus' Response to Conflict (Mt. 20:20-28)

By
Andy Davis

At A Glance:

- I. Introduction
- II. Jesus' Response to Conflict
- III. The Nature of Conflict
- IV. Conclusion
- V. Questions for Further Thought

These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.

Jesus' Response to Conflict

I. Introduction

A. Illustration: An Unnecessary Fight

1. Ken Sande tells the following story: Once, while teaching a seminar, I was approached by a woman, Diane, who told me about two engineers at her company. These top employees had a falling-out and refused to work together anymore. When they refused to collaborate on a high-priced consulting contract, the company president personally intervened for hours to convince the men to cooperate. After hitting a wall, he called in his Human Relations director, then an outside counselor. All efforts failed. Even the threat of being fired didn't end the standoff.
2. Diane told me she had recently completed a course on biblical peacemaking at her church, and she sensed God calling her to help the engineers. For several days she resisted the idea, but she ultimately felt compelled to approach the two men and offer to help them resolve their differences. She was surprised when they agreed, and that afternoon the three of them met in a vacant conference room.
3. At first both men were guarded and defensive, but as Diane prayed for guidance and slowly drew them out with thoughtful questions, the cause of their conflict finally emerged. A former supervisor had been envious of the two engineers' close working relationship and had lied to each man about the other to poison their trust. Because neither man went to the other to talk about the supervisor's statements, a canyon had opened between them.¹

B. Conflict tends to grow and widen based on assumptions and misunderstandings. Conflict can happen even when there is no good reason for the conflict to happen, as in this case. As soon as anyone starts preaching on conflict, people immediately become suspicious and start asking questions. Is something wrong? What is going on? Should I be worried? Knowing this is the natural human reaction, the motivations and reasons for this series need to be clearly expressed up front. As far as I know, our church is not in the middle of ongoing and widespread conflict. Yes, all churches always have some amount of conflict; this doesn't mean something is wrong. Our church is not moving toward or involved in a divisive conflict or some sort of church split. This seems to be where people's minds go—the worst-case scenario must be happening. This is a fear response rather than a faith response.

C. This sermon series comes from a sense of something God seems to be stirring up in several people's lives and is being used as a preventive step and training opportunity. This series is intended to be proactive, not reactive. Learning about healthy ways to respond to and navigate conflict is a general life skill that every person needs to develop if they ever hope to have healthy and satisfying relationships. Conflicts happen at home with spouses, as well as parents and kids; at work with bosses, employees or coworkers; in relationships with friends and family;

¹ Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson, [*Resolving Everyday Conflict*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 35–36.

in government with how our society operates; and in churches. Where people are in a relationship with one another, it is only a matter of time before conflict occurs.

- D. If we are going to be well equipped disciples of Jesus who experience and live in the joy, peace, and reconciliation Jesus brings to our lives, we need God to teach us how to react to and navigate conflict in the various areas of life in ways that are healthy. This series is intended to meet this spiritual need each of us has. In short, conflict is a normal and necessary part of everyday life, and it doesn't have to be destructive or harmful.²

II. Jesus' Response to Conflict

- A. Remember what one of our new core values is: Authentic Relationships. It is our desire as a church to maintain and grow our relationships with one another by sacrificially sharing our lives with one another and wanting the good of others by treating them with compassion, grace, and honesty as they mature in their spiritual journey. If we are going to create the kinds of relationships we want to have with one another, we need to realize conflict is going to happen in the process, and this can be a beneficial opportunity to grow to become like Jesus as a result. The closer we connect to one another, the higher the likelihood we will have to work through some conflict. Developing these kinds of relationships is still a growth area for us. While we have people who are building these types of relationships, we always want more people connected to CAC to join them.
- B. What happens when two people deepen the relationship they have with one another and draw closer to each other? Conflict is unavoidable. Even in the best marriages (in life's most connected relationship, when two people love one another very much), there is always conflict. If any relationship never has any conflict, this indicates an unhealthy or shallow relationship. Everyone who develops close, healthy relationships will need to work through conflict; that is just how relationships in this world work. Since conflict is a pervasive part of life, it is wise to learn how to navigate conflict in ways that are healthy and good.
- C. We will begin by looking at how Jesus responded to conflict when it crept in among His disciples. As we will see, Jesus didn't ignore conflict; He identified it, addressed it directly, and worked to get it resolved for the benefit of everyone. Here is one instance of Jesus responding to conflict:

²⁰ Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him. ²¹ And He said to her, "What do you desire?" She said to Him, "Say that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine shall sit, one at Your right, and one at Your left."²² But Jesus replied, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to Him, "We are able." ²³ He said to them, "My cup you shall drink; but to sit at My right and at My left is not Mine to give, but *it is for those* for whom it has been prepared by My Father." ²⁴ And after hearing *this*, the *other* ten *disciples* became indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles

² Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson, [*Resolving Everyday Conflict*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 7, Michael Hare and Ken Sande, [*When Church Conflict Happens: A Proven Process for Resolving Unhealthy Disagreements and Embracing Healthy Ones*](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2019), 15.

domineer over them, and those in high position exercise authority over them.²⁶ It is not this way among you, but whoever wants to become prominent among you shall be your servant,²⁷ and whoever desires to be first among you shall be your slave;²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” (Mt. 20:20-28)

- D. It is very easy for conflict to grow secondhand, especially in the church. Notice what happened: James and John (Mk. 10:35), along with or through or in response to their mother, came to Jesus and tried to do something the other disciples didn’t like (“after hearing this...”, v. 24). While the other disciples were not directly involved in what happened, it was the presenting issue in the conflict—the reason conflict became obvious. What James and John did made the other disciples angry (“the other ten disciples became indignant with the two brothers”, v. 24). The ten other disciples were angry at something that was seemingly unjust or wrong.³ Ten of the disciples thought two of them did something they should not have done, which motivated feelings of anger. Jesus noticed these group dynamics developing in His group of disciples, and He immediately intervened.
- E. When the request for the two most important and powerful positions in Jesus’ kingdom was being made, Jesus confronted these disciples with the proper perspective and pointed out to James and John that their perspective was not good. First, Jesus informs the two disciples that honor in God’s kingdom comes through suffering (“Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?”, v. 22). Positions in the kingdom of God are earned through faithfulness and suffering, not by request—just as was the case with Jesus Himself (Phil. 2:8-11). If James and John wanted the highest positions, they would have to be faithful and suffer more than anyone else. Second, Jesus instructed them as to how reward and rank are determined; it’s not up to them—it’s not even up to Jesus in this case. Only the Father makes the decision related to the highest positions in the kingdom (“it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father”, v. 23).⁴ God the Father is the One who makes the ultimate decision according to His control (sovereignty) over His creation. James and John were seeking what they should not be seeking because they lacked proper perspective. They shouldn’t have been worrying about their future position and rank because God will take care of it. Finally, Jesus let them know that they don’t really understand what they are asking for (“You do not know what you are asking.”, v. 22). Their perspective on the situation is lacking.
- F. While there are times Jesus Himself was in conflict personally, this wasn’t one of those cases. Jesus is addressing conflict that is happening between His disciples and those He is spiritually caring for. Understanding what was happening, Jesus responded by bringing all His disciples together (“Jesus called them to Himself”, v. 25). When Jesus found out the ten disciples were angry, He took initiative and dealt with the conflict that was occurring. Once gathered, Jesus dealt with the true source of the conflict through His teaching (“and said...”, v. 25). Instead of exercising authority to get what they want, those with authority and position in Jesus’ kingdom use their authority to serve others, not seek their own interests. The disciples are thinking and

³ Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Matthew 20:24 “became indignant”

⁴ In other cases, Jesus does have the authority and responsibility to give out and determine rewards and positions (Mt. 25:14-46).

operating in ways that are inconsistent with Jesus' kingdom. Leadership functions very differently than what the disciples are used to. The disciples are still trying to operate like the world rather than Jesus. Position and decision-making authority are given to those who live with servant responsibility. Authority, position, and decision making can't be disconnected from responsibility before God.

- G. Interestingly, Jesus never addressed the presenting issue with the group—who would sit on Jesus' right and left side in heaven. He addressed the true source of the conflict, which was the misplaced perspective, desires, attitudes, values and actions of the disciples ("it is not this way among you", v. 26). Hidden motives play a large part in how we behave.⁵ The problem occurred because the disciples were still thinking and acting like the world. They were focused on their own self-ambition and importance—an issue Jesus dealt with on multiple occasions. If someone wants a position of high rank in Jesus' kingdom, they should be focused on and striving for serving those around them.
- H. Frequently, conflict is not about the presenting issue at hand. Usually, conflict goes much deeper to what is happening inside us. Until issues get fixed on the inside, conflict on the outside will continue. While we tend to focus on finding solutions to the presenting issues, God tends to be more concerned about what is moving us toward the presenting issue. In short, conflict brings our hearts to the surface. Jesus dealt with the disciples' hearts. The disciples needed a change of perspective, priorities and ways of living. Their whole approach to status followed the world's way of operating. All this means conflict becomes an opportunity for personal transformation and growth if we respond to it the way Jesus encouraged the disciples to do.
- I. Understanding the importance of how Jesus responded to this conflict between His disciples helps us recognize the significance of the internal source of conflict. As soon as we realize we are in conflict, a healthy response is to immediately turn to God and invite Him to search through us to help us discern what is going on inside us related to the conflict we are experiencing:

²³ Search me, God, and know my heart; Put me to the test and know my anxious thoughts; ²⁴ And see if there is *any* hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way. (Ps. 139:23-24)
- J. While God already knows every fact about us and our lives (Ps. 139:1-6), it is still good for us to posture ourselves as if we are laying ourselves and our lives open before God. God and His Spirit can help us overcome blind spots, self-deception, and areas of ignorance. He can increase the accuracy of our self-awareness as He evaluates our thoughts and intentions through His word (Heb. 4:12). Realizing we all have the tendency and natural disposition to justify ourselves and assume we are in the right (Pr. 21:2) points out our need for God's help to get past all this.
- K. An attitude that is open and accepting of God's evaluation of us, our thoughts, our motives, and our desires is critically important if we are going to respond to conflict in healthy ways. We need to be prepared to face and deal with the fact that we may not be the person we want to

⁵ John Stott, [*Christ in Conflict: Lessons from Jesus and His Controversies*](#) (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2013).

be or as good a person as we think we are. While this reality is difficult to confront, our personal growth and development requires it. Conflict can never be resolved in a healthy way if we continue to operate with wrong motives. Not even God gives in to us when this is present in us (Jas. 4:1-3). Our motivations and desires are a critical component of conflict, and they need to be acknowledged and dealt with. Jesus promoted this same response (Mt. 7:5, Lk. 6:42).

III. The Nature of Conflict

- A. Jesus responded to this conflict in a way that is unnatural for most people. Too often, people unfortunately think that if conflict exists, it is always bad—this is very prevalent in the church. It is easy for disciples to develop unhealthy ways of responding and dealing with conflict because they think a person who is doing what God wants should never be at odds with anyone else. A moment's reflection on the sinless life of Jesus will immediately demonstrate how incorrect this perspective is. Individuals who think this way usually consider the strategy of avoiding conflict at all costs as the most God-honoring approach to conflict. Considering what the Bible teaches us about conflict and seeking after peace, we'll discover this strategy is clearly not what God desires. Conflict is a form of accountability with others that helps us develop in healthy ways.
- B. To help us better understand the nature of conflict so we can learn God's healthy ways of responding to it, we can learn from the disagreement Paul had with Barnabas as they were planning their second missionary journey:

³⁶ After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's return and visit the brothers *and sisters* in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, *and see* how they are." ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. ³⁸ But Paul was of the opinion that they should not take along with them this man who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ Now it turned into such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. ⁴⁰ But Paul chose Silas, and left after being entrusted by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. (Ac. 15:36-41)
- C. Disciples need to realize there is a difference between conflict and strife or quarrelling. Conflict is simply a difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone's goals or desires.⁶ Paul and Barnabas had a difference of opinion about John Mark and what his role should be in their ministry ("Barnabas wanted to take John...Paul was of the opinion that they should not take along with them this man", vv. 37-38). Conflict can happen when nobody is doing anything wrong but because we are different. Something as simple as a difference of opinion about a ministry strategy can bring about conflict. Not a big deal. Conflict, by itself, is not immoral. Conflict is a natural part of living in the world with other people who are different from us.
- D. Comparing conflict as a natural consequence of living in the real world to what is harmful helps us understand that we should not avoid conflict whenever possible. When conflict is not handled well, it can escalate to what is usually referred to in the Bible as strife and quarrelling.

⁶ Ken Sande, [*The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*](#), Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 29. While the terms used for conflict in the Bible can carry different meanings, in the sense that we are studying in this series, this is a good working Biblical definition.

This is the unhealthy and destructive form of conflict. This disagreement (conflict) that started as a difference of opinion about whether to include John Mark in their missionary work turned into “a sharp disagreement” (v. 39)—a state of intense, emotional turmoil especially expressed in words.⁷ Even passionate, emotional, and energetic differences and debate are not necessarily wrong, either. However, these circumstances can turn the corner into unhealthy conflict.

- E. Conflict is not bad, but the gasoline of destructive conflict is sinful selfishness.⁸ Strife is bitter and heated conflict filled with contention.⁹ Other negative behaviors relate to strife, such as selfish ambition, outbursts of anger, slander, deceit, constant friction, hostilities, factions (forming “sides”), etc. Quarrelling is very similar to strife and means to fight verbally through contentious speech acts as active warfare (Pr. 17:14, 2 Tim. 2:24, Jas. 4:2). This is very different than healthy debate.¹⁰ The purpose of quarrelling is to defeat the other side verbally instead of listening, understanding, or reaching the truth. The goal of quarrelling is to get one’s way, which is usually not good. Quarrelling commonly involves gossip (Pr. 26:20). This negative and harmful type of conflict is to be avoided (Pr. 17:14, 20:3, Rm. 13:13, Tit. 3:9) because it results from people who are hostile to God or those who are still acting as if they are still hostile to God (Rm. 1:28-29, 1 Cor. 3:3, 2 Cor. 12:20, Gal. 5:19-24).
- F. Paul and Barnabas faced the exact same situation and the exact same decision. Yet, because they are different individuals, they thought differently about the situation. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them and Paul did not. The difference was not the problem—the difference even seems to be God given. Paul’s logical personality and approach to life comes from God, and Barnabas’s spiritual gift of encouragement comes from God. It seems to be these are the primary elements that caused the difference of opinion. Paul and Barnabas ended up not being able to find a solution to their difference of opinion so they could work together, so they both worked independently on the same task (Ac. 15:39-41).
- G. What are your thoughts and feelings about conflict? Do you assume all conflict is bad and comes from someone doing something wrong? How do you usually respond to it? Have you noticed any conflict response patterns in how you tend to deal with conflict?
- H. Our leadership team went through a Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI) and had some ConsentiaGroup training on the results of that inventory.¹¹ In this training, we saw and learned about each of our unique conflict styles and motivations. I learned about the pathway I take when I am in conflict. The material we learned about conflict can be helpful to all of us, even if you didn’t have the opportunity to take the training. We can better understand how we think and feel about conflict by learning about how different groups of people are motivated during times of conflict.

⁷ Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Acts 15:39 “a sharp disagreement”

⁸ Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson, [Resolving Everyday Conflict](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 18.

⁹ Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Galatians 5:20 “strife”

¹⁰ Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Pr. 17:14 “quarrel” and 2 Tim. 2:24 “quarrelsome” and Jas. 4:2 “quarrel”. Healthy debate can be seen in the early church’s discussion about the lifestyle requirements of non-Jews in the church (Ac. 15).

¹¹ This material is based on the Discover-Relate-Grow training booklet by ConsentiaGroup.

- I. While each of us is different, there are three broad motivations in conflict. Some people will prioritize accommodation when they are in conflict because they are motivated to preserve harmony above other considerations (Blue). Others tend to assert themselves in conflict because they are motivated to overcome the obstacles that get in the way of completing the accomplishments being sought after (Red). The third group is motivated by analyzing the conflict to understand it and the best solution by slowing things down and helping others understand what is happening in the conflict (Green). These motivations and tendencies of different groups will clearly lead to different destinations.
- J. Do you recognize any of these motivations in you when you are in conflict? How do they influence how you act during times of conflict?

IV. Conclusion

- A. Conflict is an unavoidable human experience in life. We live in this world with other people who are different from us, by God's design, and this is going to lead to conflict. Conflict can even happen when everyone is doing good. Since conflict can happen in every area of our life, conflict resolution skills are important skills that greatly increase the quality of our lives. Individuals who never learn how to deal with conflict generally live miserable lives.
- B. We are given God's wonderfully wise life advice about conflict:
 - ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all people. (Rm. 12:18)