

LESSON 9

Dealing with Conflict in the Church

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

— James 4:1-3

Introduction

We are all individuals with private feelings, tastes, temperaments, fears, likes, and dislikes. We are alike in so many ways, but have a great many differences, too. Because we have **free will**, each of us sees the environment differently. Free will is more than just the ability to choose between good and evil, right and wrong. It shapes everything we think, experience, and do. We grow to like some things and dislike others, and we develop *personal preferences* for nearly everything we know. If all of us see so many things a little differently, it's inevitable that we will "bump heads" with one another now and then.

Let's do a harmless little exercise. Take any person at church you know and **like** and think about *everything* about them. Now think about everything about them that you don't understand, don't like, don't agree with, or that bothers you: appearance, tone of voice, food and clothing preferences, personality quirks, hobbies, choice of friends, annoying habits (who decides what's annoying? Just you, or everyone?), their attitudes, etc. – the list can be rather long sometimes.

Yet we mostly *overlook* these things (unless the characteristic is completely intolerable to us). *And these are your friends!!* What about strangers or enemies? Let's face it - we have a hard time with people who aren't exactly like us, things that aren't our thing, or ideas that aren't like ours. And usually, we don't know exactly what to do about it, so we avoid learning to know and love each other better.

Conflict is Inevitable

It seems that conflict in this world is **inevitable**. All this talk about "living in perfect harmony" sounds nice but seems like baloney! Maybe "can't we just get along" is a more practical and attainable goal. Despite this incongruity, we can still be filled with God's love and show it to each other. We can train ourselves to see other people as God sees them – after all, it's not about what **we** prefer and love in one another, but about what **God** prefers and loves. God put *all of us* into the same spiritual box: the one labeled "His precious possessions." Which brings us back to another unfortunate consequence of free will: **conflict in the church**. Unless we practice God's love, conflict will bubble over and damage the church. What causes conflicts and disagreements in the church of our Lord? Well, we talked about the

primary reason above. Conflict is one of the two great consequences of the God-given privilege of free will (the other being the freedom to commit sin and reject God). Scripture deals with this risk very directly. James 4:1 states:

What causes conflicts and quarrels among you? Don't they come from desires that wage war within you?

What are these 'desires' we have in relation to our Christian brothers and sisters? Conflicts don't usually happen because we are trying to defend the faith and save the church – they usually happen because we are irritated at others who can't seem to see things our way, or they do what we think are "bone-headed" actions, or they don't act the way we feel they should act. Even if someone is actively *sinful* or trying to introduce sinful ideas into the church, attacking them with anger or vengeance will not result in a Godly resolution of the problem. Consider Galatians 5:14-15:

"For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another."

That scripture is always true, regardless of the situation. There is never a reason where "biting and devouring one another" is appropriate - not even with church discipline for deliberate sin. Sin and false teaching *must* be addressed and removed from the body but must be done in love and with the purpose of restoration.

In a previous lesson, we discussed how to deal with difficult people. These difficult people exist because we are all different, and sometimes those differences chaff our sensibilities. Our free will allows us to judge the behavior and words of others, including those in the congregation. Our judgments are not always very accurate or appropriate, and sometimes not very kind. Unless we are timely or even urgent in discussing our concerns with the other person, we may miss our "window of opportunity" to resolve the differences easily and build a new bridge in the relationship. The longer a conflict remains unresolved, the more our bad opinions color our thinking and sour our relationships...sometimes past the point of repair. It should go without saying that healing and cooperation in love are essential in the life, maintenance, and growth of the church.

The Importance of Unity and Peace in the Church

Ephesians 4:2-3 - *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.*

I Peter 3:8 - *Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.*

I Corinthians 1:10 - *I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree (literally, "same thing you speak") and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.*

James 1:10 - *Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation ("tapeinosis" - humble state, spiritual abasement), because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.*

Ephesians 4:2-3 - *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.*

I Peter 3:8 - *Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.*

Romans 12:18 - *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men.*

It's obvious that a great deal of emphasis is placed on our attitudes toward each other. And we also know that good attitudes begin with *us* (see Romans 12:18 above?). Before we start thinking about the bad attitudes, feelings, and actions of *other members*, we should first think about our own faults. It's easy to *judge* each other, but we can't really do much about fixing their faults. It's much easier to be a good example to help lead others to better behavior.

Why Are We So Easily Triggered?

Several factors are involved:

- **PRIDE:** Even if deserved, receiving excessive praise and attention can easily become addictive and finally lead to pride. Pride removes God from the focus of our heart and causes us to neglect, dislike, or even harm others
- **JEALOUSY:** envy is a direct result of pride. We become upset with others successes, as they take the focus of attention away from ourselves
- **IGNORANCE:** a lack of biblical knowledge and understanding (especially when considering doctrinal matters); sometimes, a lack of knowledge and understanding about our fellow brothers and sisters is also a problem
- **PREDJUDICE:** a false and maladaptive way to understand and explain the behavior of others; sometimes, this is a maladaptive way to protect ourselves from an expected or anticipated threat from others
- **CARELESS WORDS AND ACTIONS:** slander, gossip, complaining, criticism, arguing, avoidance, unfriendliness, laziness, being untrustworthy...just to name a few
- **PERSONALITY DIFFERENCES AND CLASHES:** instead of projecting love to others, first airing out the things we don't like about them and then dumping our negative words and attitudes on them
- **DIFFERENCES OF OPINION:** magnified to an inappropriate level due to the faults listed above. These are often based on simple misunderstandings, and sometimes created when they are confused for important doctrinal differences. Paul and Peter had some reminders about such attitudes:

I Corinthians 13:4-7 – *“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”*

I Peter 4:8 - *"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly; love covers a multitude of sins."*

Philippians 2:3-4 - *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others"*

How Can We Avoid These Problems?

What is the advice of scripture?

- **Philippians 2:3** – no selfishness; consider others as better than yourself
- **Proverbs 15:1** – soft answers turn away wrath
- **Ephesians 4:26-27** – don't let anger fester
- **Matt. 18:15-17** – go to your brother
- **2 Timothy 2:23** – avoid foolish controversies
- **Galatians 6:1** – restore gently
- **Matthew 5:23-24** – reconcile before giving your offering

When there are deep-seated differences of opinion, especially in religious matters, things get personal and emotional very quickly. We can build the disagreement up to the point where conflict becomes inevitable, and damage to relationships becomes unavoidable.

Things to Consider When Facing Conflict

"10 % of conflict is due to difference in opinion and 90% is due to wrong tone of voice."

--Stephen Covey

"Choose to be kind over being right, and you'll be right every time".

--Richard Carlson

"Rule number one is, don't sweat the small stuff. Rule number two is, it's all small stuff."

--Robert Eliot

"Ask yourself: is this the hill you want to die on?" (holding the high ground at all costs, regardless of the strategic value)

Guidelines for dealing with conflict when it arises:

1. All relationships must be grounded in **humility** – God has already promised us eternal life with Him in heaven - we need to be less attached to things of this world and self-importance
2. Enlist God's **strength** and **wisdom** in approaching contentious situations through *prayer* and *scripture study*
3. Use the **bible** as the standard in all disagreements
4. Find and discuss **common ground**
5. Seek **understanding**
6. Expose and admit to any underlying **selfish motives** that drive a conflict
7. When upset, avoid **emotional outbursts** that trigger conflict

8. To avoid misunderstandings, **communicate very clearly** when discussing debatable/disputable matters
9. Give others **time to process** discussions – rushed conversations often go wrong
10. Ask for and provide **forgiveness**
11. Look for **reconciliation** over “being right” or “winning”

The Specific Directions of Matthew 18:15-17:

In these verses, Jesus describes the best way to directly resolve serious conflicts between brethren, especially matters of sin and even church discipline. Parts of this process can provide a basic pattern for all grievances between brethren. It provides a spiritual process for resolving serious conflicts. It begins with interpersonal matters and can move up to the congregational level if necessary. Importantly, it provides for restoration of relationships and fellowship at all levels

1. **Go alone** – address the issue(s) *privately*; make sure it's worth addressing
2. **If he listens** – resolution; you've won back your brother
3. **If he doesn't listen** – retry, and take one or two *confirming witnesses*
4. **If he refuses again** – tell the *church* (a collective witness; consensus); be focused and firm, but show concern and love (not anger and disdain)
5. **If he still refuses** – withdraw and treat him as an *outsider* (gentile/ tax collector), but continue love; offer the opportunity to reconsider and repent
6. **If he repents** – be ready for *full restoration*, no strings attached (unless for the physical/ spiritual protection of the individual and church – restoration still means that everyone will sometimes have to live with the consequences)

Conclusion

Conflict resolution is very critical, even historically. Failure to seek forgiveness and choosing to forsake unity always has consequences. Take the story of Jacob and Esau, for instance. Their personal struggle began even before birth, finally culminating in Jacob stealing their father's birthright and primary blessing (with the help of Isaac's wife, Rebekah). Of course, he would become the father of the nation of Israel. This led to anger and hatred that forced Jacob to flee for his life from his brother. It seems that Abraham and his household were rather poor at resolving family issues, as the previous conflict between Sarah and Hagar led to Hagar's banishment with her son, Ishmael.

Jacob eventually humbled himself and sought to be restored to his brother Esau, who was glad to be reunited with his brother, despite Jacob's treachery. God graciously intervened with Esau's future, allowing him to father the Edomites. God had also previously intervened in the matter of Ishmael, and he became the father of 12 sons/ 12 tribes, the Arab nations (Northern Arabs).

It was necessary for God to personally direct the outcome in these situations, as all the men in Isaac's family had wrongly taken matters into their own hands. Like many today, they created rather than quieted conflict. If we struggle with disagreements and damaged relationships, we also need to let God teach us how to get along and restore what we have broken. We must remember the admonition to be at

peace with others, as far as it is possible. This isn't just good advice – this is essential for the church to survive and grow.

Memory Verse

“Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ²then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.”

– **Philippians 2:1-2**

For Discussion

1. Why is it so necessary to be “quick to hear and slow to speak” (James 1:19) when we have disagreements with our brothers and sisters?
2. What are ways we can develop more patience with our Christian brethren?
3. Have you ever tried to resolve a conflict with another person in the church who refused to allow it to be addressed or corrected? What did you do?
4. When you have successfully dealt with and corrected a church problem, what methods or resources did *you* find helpful in achieving a Godly outcome? What methods have you found to be of *little* value?
5. Can conflict in the church ever be a *good thing*? How?