

Playground
No Pushing or Shoving
November 8, 2015

PRELUDE – My Lighthouse
Worship Songs – My Lighthouse / It Is Well

Some of us can sing that song and really mean it. We can look at our lives and see your hand leading us to victory, blessing and fruitfulness. For that we give you thanks and praise. Help us to serve you well by giving to others what you have given to us.

But some of us cannot sing “it is well” and mean it. We look at our lives and we feel defeated, shortchanged and useless. So we turn to you and confess that’s the truth. And we ask you to lift our eyes beyond our circumstances to Jesus and what He has done for us in his life, his death, his resurrection and what He will do when He

returns so that even though it may not seem well on the outside, it truly can be well on the inside – with our soul.

In the power of His name we pray. Amen.

OK, before you sit down, say “hello” to the people around you and then we’ll continue.

Feature – Mean Video Announcements

Today, as Shannon said, we’re continuing in our series *Playground: simple rules for getting along with others* and this morning we’re going to be talking about everyone’s favorite aspect of interpersonal relationships.

“None of us ever gets to be in relationship with a finished person,” writes Tim Lane in his book, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*. “So it’s

inevitable. If you live with other sinners [and we all do], you will have conflict. [In fact] the closer you are to someone, the more potential there is for conflict.”ⁱ

And that’s true even though we try to believe the best about people and make allowances for their faults (which is the playground “rule” we talked about two weeks ago). And it’s true even though we try – as much as it depends on us – to be at peace with everyone by proactively minimizing tension (which is the “rule” we talked about last week). Reality is ... there are times when the allowance simply runs out; there are times when keeping the peace goes beyond what we can do on our own.

And when we reach that point – *conflict is present* whether we want to admit it or not. It’s there whether we want to deal with it or not.

And that's when a lot of us freak out because we *don't like conflict*. In fact, we're afraid of it for many reasons (beyond the obvious fact that it's not a lot of fun).

- Some of us dread conflict because we don't communicate our thoughts and feelings very well, especially in the face of opposition (if the person doesn't like what we're saying) and we're dead meat in a verbal battle.
- Some of us don't like dealing with conflict because we don't want to be thought of as a whiner or be labeled as hyper-sensitive.
- Some of us fear that trying to address conflict might serve to make things worse than they already are.

But perhaps the greatest reason that a lot of us are afraid of conflict is that we've never seen it

done well. We don't have very good models of what healthy conflict is supposed to look like. Instead, what most of us have experienced in our families and in our institutions (including church, I might add) are two very unhealthy extremes.

At one end of the spectrum, there's the "pretend everything is ok even when it isn't" model where you just avoid the issues and hope that things will magically improve on their own. At the other end is the model where conflict becomes a war with lots of yelling and screaming and fighting and maybe even physical abuse.

About a year after Jetta and I were married, we became best friends with Henry and Sandy who we met at our church. Sandy had grown up in a home where her parents never had a conflict that she was aware of until one day, when she was a teenager, there was a huge fight. The very

next day, they gathered the family together and announced they were getting a divorce.

So, after she and Henry had their first fight as husband and wife, she freaked out. She said, “It took my mom and dad 15 years to get to this point, and here we are after just a year!”

Henry was totally confused. “What are you talking about, woman?” (That’s how he said it, too – “woman”).

“Well, now we’re probably going to get divorced!” Sandy said.

And she was serious because those were the only models of conflict she had seen growing up. You stuff it for years and years and years, then you blow up and it’s all over. The marriage, the friendship, the business partnership comes to an end. It’s done.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Reality is ... you can't avoid conflict but you can avoid destructive conflict if you do it wisely. Furthermore, if you avoid destructive conflict you might even experience redemptive conflict – a process that actually produces emotional and spiritual growth and maturity.

And that's what I want for you. And that's what I want for myself. More importantly, that's what God wants for all of us.

The “Rule” Explained

And that's the point of today's playground rule: “No Pushing or Shoving” ... which is a brilliant rule, actually, because it communicates exactly what we're saying: that there will always be misunderstandings and hurt feelings and even

“mean behavior” on the playground, but those offenses don’t have to be handled in ways that are damaging or dangerous.

You *can't* avoid conflict but you *can* avoid *destructive* conflict. And if you avoid *destructive* conflict you *might* even experience *redemptive* conflict (conflict that changes you for the better).

That’s the rule.

So, how do we do that? How do we deal wisely with offenses before they get to the point of blowing up into something that causes permanent damage?

Well, to explain it we need to go back to one of the tools we talked about last Sunday – the “Left Hand Column” – which, as we saw was very helpful at identifying underlying tension and unresolved conflict between two people.

Remember how it works?

What I <i>didn't</i> say	What was said

You take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle. On the right hand side, you write down the stuff you are willing to verbalize. On the left hand

side – in the left-hand column – you write things you *want* to say, maybe even *need* to say but are *not* willing to say because you're afraid of the reaction it might cause.

For example ...

- It bothers you that your spouse doesn't clean up after themselves but, since you never say anything, that goes in the LHC.
- A co-worker constantly misses assignments but you don't want to make a big deal of it.

That's in the LHC.

- You got left out of the loop on an important conversation and decision.
- Your kids didn't remember your birthday.
- Your friend didn't respond the way you hoped.

... but you didn't say anything. All of those hurts and offenses get written into the left-hand column.

And those statements represent the issues that are stressing and straining your relationship; issues that, if they are not dealt with at some point, will lead to damage and maybe even destruction.

And I don't mean just damage to the relationship or even the other person. I'm talking about damage to you because the longer you neglect

those thoughts and feelings the more they can become destructive to your soul.

Remember the scripture we read last week from chapter four of Paul's letter to the Ephesians?

No more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth.

In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself. Ephesians 4:25 [Msg]

Don't pretend it's OK when it really isn't. It doesn't help anyone, including you.

Instead, Paul says ...

Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry - but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry.

*Don't give the Devil that kind of
foothold in your life.*

Ephesians 4:26-27 (Msg)

As we saw last week, when we let issues remain hidden in the left-hand column, we violate every instruction in that verse. We stay angry. We go to bed angry. Eventually, the LHC becomes fuel for revenge and that gives the devil a foothold in our lives ... which, by definition, is destructive to your soul.

So, *for many reasons* we need to keep a short left-hand column ... which is where we left this discussion last week. What we didn't talk about then (and what I said we'd talk about this week) is what to *do* with the stuff in the LHC. How do you get rid of it? How do you clear it out?

The simple answer is to say, "Well, just blab it out there. Just go up to the person and say, 'hey,

look, you've been getting on my nerves for a really long time now and I have all this junk in my LHC and you need to deal with it. Here ya go" then dump it all out on them.

Quite honestly, when I was a bit younger and first learned this concept that was my default method. "I'm mad at you or I'm hurt, so *let me tell you what you did!*"

However, telling the other person is only *one* of the options. And I think this is really important to understand and here's why: *not everything that ends up in our left-hand column - not everything that offends us or hurts us - is all their fault.*

Now, some of it might be. But some of what's there is unintentional. Like a kid bumping into you on the playground or a stray kickball hitting you, it isn't meant to be malicious. It's just life on the playground. And some of what's there, if

we're honest about it, is really our fault. It's there because we are fallen sinners who bring our own junk to the playground with us.

And you have to deal with *those kinds* of hurts and offenses differently than you do the ones that are *intentional*.

Three Responses to Offense

So, let's break it down into the *three* possible responses when it comes to dealing with what's in the LHC.

And as we do this, I really do hope you'll see how dramatically different these responses are in comparison to the two models – the two extremes – we talked about earlier.

1. Sometimes dealing with hurts and offenses we feel means confessing our own

sin and not theirs.

And here's why: the Apostle James pointed it out in the fourth chapter of his letter when he asks:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. James 4:1-2 (NIV)

Some of the tension ... some of the unmet expectations that wind up in our left-hand column are there because our desires are out of whack. We're trying to get something from another person that no person can give to us. And that demandingness needs to be dealt with not by going to that person but by confessing it to God.

Several years ago there was a guy I ran into

regularly (not a NHCCer) who just rubbed me the wrong way. I felt like he was arrogant and stuck on himself; like he thought he was better than everyone else – and specifically, me. So, whenever I talked to him, I'd smile in his face and say all the right words but I would have a very dark LHC dialogue going on in my head.

Then one day, I realized the problem wasn't him. It was me. It wasn't that he was arrogant and stuck on himself. (Well, maybe a little bit). The real problem was that I was insecure and I needed someone to blame for being arrogant so I didn't have to address my insecurities!

Dealing with the LHC meant that, instead of talking to him about how I thought he acted arrogant and better than everyone else, I had to confess it to God as sin: as my failure, my propensity to blame my weaknesses on someone else instead of owning them myself.

And I had to do that not just once. It was every time that thought came into my head.

This is why Jesus once said (and Shannon talked about this in the second message of this series):

“How can you think of saying to your friend, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own eye?”

Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye.”

Matthew 7:3-5 (NLT)

Sometimes, we need to clear out the LHC by claiming what’s there as our junk – not the other person’s – and confessing it as sin.

And I think you can see how doing so will not only avoid potentially destructive conflict. It will also be redemptive because it will change you for the better.

Let's move to the next possibility.

2. Sometimes clearing the LHC means giving grace (i.e. treating people better than they deserve).

Sometimes, *it* really is something about the other person that rubs us the wrong way but, as we look at them, we realize that maybe they're doing the best they can. Maybe their behavior is from a simple lack of maturity or wisdom. There's no malice. So we let it go. We wipe the LHC clean. That's grace.

And, sometimes, if we have the strength to do so, clearing the LHC means saying, "yeah, you really were a jerk today, but I know that's not your

normal way of being and so I'm going to treat you better than you deserve. I'm just going to wipe the slate clean." That's grace, too.

By the way, for those of us who are followers of Jesus, this grace response ought to be the response we choose quite often.

As we've read several times already in this series.

Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Colossians 3:12 (NLT)

Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.

Colossians 3:13 (NLT)

Treat people better than they've earned or deserved, because that's how God has treated you. Wipe the slate clean for them because that's what God did for you in Jesus.

And again, I think you can see how that avoids potentially destructive conflict and also changes you for the better.

So, dealing with what's in the LHC sometimes means confessing our own sin and leaving it at that. And sometimes it means extending grace and leaving it at that. (Actually, a lot of times it means a combination of both).

However ... when you've pulled the log out of your own eye (as Jesus put it) and there is still stuff in your LHC that truly did get there because of the other person ... or, when you've reached the

point when you've run out of grace and you feel like you just can't make any more allowances without it becoming destructive hard on you ... then it's time to move on to the third possible response.

3. Sometimes we need to confront the other person.

And this is what, for most of us, strikes fear in our hearts because this is what pulls the issue from the LHC to the RHC. This is what puts the issue on the table for all to see and hear.

And if you're a Christian, if you're someone who believes in Jesus, this is also where your faith gets put into practice in a way that tests it and refines it and grows it in ways that few other experiences can.

And I say that because when you have to deal

with your feelings of being hurt and offended by confessing your sin or by extending grace, those processes are internal. They're between you and God. The other person never needs to know about it. But this one is external. This one involves you and at least one other person and that's risky. You really do have to step out in faith believing that what God says really is the best plan.

And there is a plan – a well-defined, God-ordained process that, quite frankly, sets Christians apart from the world in how we deal with conflict. It's a core value. It's a sell-the-farm non-negotiable because it not only helps us to avoid destructive conflict, it can lead to conflict that is redemptive.

A Process from God

So, what is this process? Jesus describes it for us in the 18th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew.

If your brother sins against you, go to him. Tell him what he did wrong. Keep it between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won him back.

But what if he won't listen to you? Then take one or two others with you. Scripture says, 'Every matter must be proved by the words of two or three witnesses.'

But what if he also refuses to listen to the witnesses? Then tell it to the church. And what if he refuses to listen even to the church?

Then don't treat him as your brother. Treat him as you would treat an ungodly person or a tax collector. Matthew 18:15-17 (CEV)

Now, clearly Jesus is speaking to his followers here. He's speaking to people who believe in Him about how to treat other people who believe with whom there is conflict ... but the process actually works with anyone who is willing to follow it.

So let's break it down.

Step 1. Privately point out the offense as you see it.

If you're a Christian and you've been hurt or offended by someone and you've taken the log out of your eye and you've run out of grace to extend, you're to take the initiative and go to them and tell them what you're seeing.

And you're to do it gently because the purpose is not to be right or to win an argument. It's to restore the relationship. Do it as if you were

providing valuable feedback that would be helpful for them to know ... because *you are* and *it would be helpful* for them to know.

“I’ve got to tell you some things that are going to be hard for me to say and maybe hard for you to hear. But I’m messed up inside because I’ve got all this bitterness stored up towards you and I don’t like it. It’s a part of every interaction I have with you. I’m constantly avoiding it because I want you to think that everything is just peachy, when it isn’t. So, can we talk?”

When you do something like that, friends, it can be a real God-moment in your life. If you’re doing it because of what Jesus said, His power will be at work in you and in the situation. That’s what it means to act in faith.

And Jesus says that sometimes they will hear you and agree with you ... though maybe not at first –

there might be some disagreement and some harsh words and stress. And you might even discover that *you* were wrong. It's amazing how often we jump to incorrect conclusions about the motives of other people. I'd say that at least half of the times I've been upset with someone, there is a piece of the puzzle that I didn't have that changed everything.

But, if they did do something wrong, when they do agree with you – when they confess that they have done something that hurt or offended you, even if it wasn't intentional – Jesus says you have won them back, which means you've restored the relationship with them. You're on the same page again.

And, at that point, the left hand column begins to clear and you begin to move forward and experience what the scripture says ought to be true of relationships: “no more lies; no more

pretense” because they understand you better and you understand them better. It might not have been easy but that conflict was redemptive.

Of course, it doesn't always work out like that. Sometimes, the other person doesn't agree with what you said. They don't see the offense that you're pointing out or their explanation of their actions or intentions doesn't resolve it for you. There is still tension in the relationship.

At that point, Jesus says, you take it to the next level.

Step 2. Ask friends to substantiate and mediate.

If the offense is something that happened in public, you find some witnesses who can say “we saw you do or say this hurtful or offensive

thing.”

If it’s something that happened just between you and the other person, you go to some safe, wise and trustworthy people and you tell them that the two of you are having a conflict and that you need their help. Then you set up a time for everyone to get together and you sit down and talk it over again. And hopefully that resolves it.

And it might resolve it in a way you don’t expect. I’ve been in situations where I’ve invited other people to sit in on a conflict resolution and, after hearing the other side of the story, they told *me* that *I* was the one who was off base. The friends you invite to substantiate your claim might not be able to do that after hearing the other side of the story, and you have to be willing to accept that.

I’ve been also been in situations where two

people have come to an peace over an offense but it had been so painful on both sides that they needed help in getting back on an even keel. So, they invited other people to be part of the process of working through the emotion until they were able to relate normally again.

And let me say that if you're a friend who gets invited to be part of this kind of a process, don't wimp out.

Of course, step 2 (like step 1) doesn't always end happily. There's no guarantee that the other person will even agree to meet in the first place. And there's no guarantee that they'll listen to the other people, even if they do meet. But that doesn't matter. We're not responsible to control the outcome of the process. We're responsible to initiate the steps of the process as necessary.

Now, if step 2 doesn't bring resolution, then Jesus said there is one more thing to be done.

Step 3. Seek an authority to discern and arbitrate.

Now, again, Jesus is talking specifically about believers and how we are to handle conflict so, for those of us who are Christians, that authority is the leadership of the church – the pastors and elders.

And I know that sounds a little cultish, maybe, but can you think of a better alternative at this point? Two followers of Christ get crosswise and can't resolve it; they invite their peers to help them but there is still no resolution. Where better to turn than to the men and women who are called by God to care for the spiritual well-being of both parties?

Or, as another scripture puts it:

Obey your spiritual leaders and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they know they are accountable to God.

Hebrews 13:17 (NLT)

And you know, it's really sad that more Christians don't take this seriously. I've seen situations where two believers got crosswise about something and instead of following these three steps they took the matter to court. Do you think that judge or jury gave a rip about their souls? Absolutely not.

Of course, as I said a few minutes ago, this process will work even in situations that don't involve Christians. In that case, when you get to this point, you have to go to some mutually-respected authority ... which might actually be a court of law.

But at this point, the goal is to find someone who can listen impartially to both parties and offer up a plan for restitution and reconciliation, if it's possible.

And sometimes, Jesus says, that's not possible because the offender still won't listen and at that point you have to treat them like a person who does not know God. You can't assume the relationship is the same as it used to be. You have to change the nature of your relationship with them.

And we'll talk more about that next week in the final message of this series, *Playground Closes at Dark* – what to do when the conflict has reached the point where “playing together” no longer seems possible.

Taking Step One

Now, I think I could end the message here and we'd all have a pretty good takeaway with these three steps, but I think it's important to acknowledge that step one of the process is probably the hardest. Privately confronting another person with how they have hurt or offended you takes a lot of courage and just as much skill.

So, I want to take just few minutes to pass along some pointers from personal experience that might be of value next time you find yourself in this situation.

1. Wait for the right time – but do not delay unnecessarily.

Remember, the primary goal in confronting is restoration of the relationship and the spiritual growth and development that will come from

the process. So, timing is important. Environment is important. Pay attention to those things, but don't let them become an excuse for putting off what you need to do.

As we've pointed out several times this week and last, the longer you let your anger fester over how you've been hurt, the more room Satan has to plant seeds of bitterness in your heart, and once that crop comes up it is extremely difficult to root out.

2. Write out your thoughts if it's helpful, but don't give it to the person.

Over the years, I have discovered that it almost always helps to clarify the issues by writing out all the junk you are feeling. I have also discovered (the hard way) that it almost never helps to give it to the person who has hurt or offended you.

In fact, my experience is that it is almost always counterproductive because, one, the other person has no opportunity to ensure that they understand what you really mean, and two, when you write out your junk it's very easy to go overboard with your criticism. I can almost guarantee you that they will take it harder than you mean it.

So, write it out if you need to, refer to it when you meet with the other person, and then get rid of it. Burn it if you have to.

One more piece of advice:

3. Pray, then go in the confidence that you are joining God in what He is already doing!

Why pray? Because only God can change a human heart and that's what you're hoping will

happen to their heart and to yours if necessary.

And what is God doing? He's trying to grow you up and trying to grow up the other person and this situation is a prime occasion for Him to do that in both of your lives.

Conclusion

As long as you and I live in this world ... as long as we have to rub shoulders daily with the sinners around us and continue to do battle with the sin that remains inside of us ... you and I will not be able to avoid conflict. But you can avoid destructive conflict. God has shown us how. And if we avoid destructive conflict we might even experience redemptive conflict – conflict that changes us for the better.

Let's pray to that end.

- We admit that the models we've seen are wrong, and the conclusion we've made based on those models that 'it's best to just keep your mouth shut' is also wrong.
- We admit that it's a lack of faith that causes us to fear doing what You clearly say we should do.
- We're thankful for grace and forgiveness that has wiped the slate clean of those sins. But we want to be more than forgiven. We want to live the way you say we should live.
 - So, give us power and strength to wipe the slate clean by admitting the offenses and hurts that have been caused by our own sin. Some of us need to do that today.

- Give us power to wipe the slate clean by treating people better than they deserve – as you have done for us. Some of us need to do that today.

- And when we can't do those things, give us power to take step one of confronting. And help us to trust you as we do. Some of us need to do that today.

Feature – We Can Work It Out

CLOSING COMMENTS / Offering

1. Baptism sign up today
2. Offering

Endnotes

ⁱ Timothy S. Lane, Relationships: A Mess Worth Making, several quotes meshed together