

# **Dealing With Conflict**

*Philippians 4:2-9*

Family Enrichment: Parenting for Relationships

January 27, 2013

## **Introduction**

This evening we bring to a conclusion this component of our annual Family Enrichment series. We have spent four Sunday evenings focusing on texts with an eye as to their implications and application for the development of Gospel relationships in our children. The Scriptures have confronted us with the nature of true, interpersonal dynamic that should arise from hearts that are in-tune with, led by and filled with the Holy Spirit. I hope it has been clear that we have not attempted to present a course of instruction that will be perfectly effective just because we "do it correctly." Proper "Gospel relationships" can only occur because and out of the Gospel's work in our hearts. We have asserted that patterns can be cut, foundations laid and preparations made that can find proper expression as God's Spirit brings change in the hearts of even the youngest of children. We also hope it has been clear that the principle factor involved in the teaching of relationships to children is the modeling of relationships before them. Therefore, what we have been finding as application has much broader concerns than merely for those who find themselves parents.

In fact, each of us involved in the life of Clearcreek Chapel is actively engaged in the modeling of Christian living for children whether we realize it or not. Much of our children's reflex responses to various situations are habituated long before they enter junior high! The adage, "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" is partially true before any of the puppies are definitively paper-trained. You may serve in the Nurseries or in Children's Ministries and have a direct impact on the modeling of relationship. But there are the readily observable interactions that each of us make with parents, teachers, and the children themselves that occur in hallways, flock-host homes, on the phone, via email and text messages, or in living rooms throughout the congregation. Children see, hear, and subsequently learn much in each of these settings.

Which should then lead us to recognize that each of us continually presents a failed and faulty vision for life. Let me repeat that sentence. Which should then lead us to recognize that each of us continually presents a failed and faulty vision for life. But that brings us to the beauty and glory of the Gospel. The Gospel comes to us in our weakness and rebellion and then promises to change us in spite of our best attempts to "do our best." This actually leads us to tonight's topic; that of dealing with conflict. Conflict is inevitable. It is a predictable component of human life. From the blame-shifting seen in the Garden from Adam and Eve and the murder of Abel, we recognize that conflict has remained an unavoidable aspect of personal relationships. In fact the Scriptures tell us that

conflict arises because of desires that are found in our hearts as they follow the idols we have erected to serve ourselves. Conflict is present because we are sinners in need of the gospel daily, hourly, actually...continually.

Conflicts then should be seen as opportunities for change that God presents before us to demonstrate His grace and power. Let me repeat *that* sentence again. Conflicts are then should be seen as opportunities for change that God presents before us to demonstrate His grace and power. God's work in our lives is testimony, not to our ability to learn and succeed, but rather to display his essentiality. Let us pause in prayer as we turn to Philippians chapter 4 to examine a text that presents an example of conflict in the life of this Macedonian congregation and see what we can have "modeled" for us.

## **Conflict's Context (vs 2,3)**

As we near the end of this letter to this church in Philippi, Paul is elaborating on several particular issues of note for the Philippians. They have been challenged to live as citizens of heaven in the context of their daily lives. This included a very noteworthy issue involving personal conflict. As you may recall, we suggested that verse 27 of chapter 1 contains the thesis of the epistle in general. The challenge was for the members of this colony of heaven, who are living in the Roman colony of Philippi as citizens of the empire, to see their lives in view of their true emperor. The phrase in our ESV translated "let your manner of life be" speaks directly to the idea of citizenship. Citizens are to engage one-another to accomplish the "common good," the will of the state in accordance with the "laws of the land." They are to live in a certain and acceptable way. The Philippians would have heard the analogy very clearly. So when we enter this section of chapter 4, the call to common service, work and worship would still be fresh in their thinking.

We first of all find conflict's context portrayed in verses 2 and 3.

*I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.*

### **Individuals**

It is common for us, in settings like this, to present conflict as a vague, intangible concept. But conflict occurs between people. Conflict may involve ideas and issues but it always involves individuals. Issues do not cause conflict, people do. The apostle Paul does not elaborate on the precise nature of the issue that created this concern. However, we are presented with their names, Euodia and Syntyche. It is a rare event in pulpit practice today for preachers to name those

involved in various sins and failures that may be discussed in sermonic presentations. Subtle references are used to “broaden” the application and avoid embarrassment. And, although I am not endorsing a sweeping “name the offender” campaign here, we should pause and take note that though we may be hidden from public eye, God knows our relational conflicts. It is also important to note that Paul expects a resolution of this problem, without “taking sides” on the issue. This could be because Paul thinks the issue itself is unimportant and that is often the case even in contemporary settings. But it could go beyond that to demonstrate the importance of dealing with differences without allowing the “disagreement” to cause disruption and bring shame to the “colony.”

## Helpers

To accomplish maintaining peace in the face of disagreement sometimes requires “helpers” to get a good handle on the situation. Others are to engage in this “agreement process”. This “true companion” (which could be translated as a proper name as well, as “Syzygus”) is called upon to “help.” Often, after conflict has created the tension and misunderstanding and then lack of trust that often follows, it is necessary for others to step in and help promote the restoration. The common concern, “I don’t want to get involved” does not apply here. In the life of citizenship, it is everyone’s concern and some are called to participate in situations and concerns that are uncomfortable. It may be that Syzygus is particularly gifted and skilled in relational matters. It could be that he has a good understanding of the issue that led to the concern in the first place and can explain and teach them through the problem. Or it may be he is accessible and reliable, ready to serve because he cares about the nature of the gospel and has a comparable desire to Paul to see this resolved.

## Extension

And this issue in the text exemplifies the typical extension of the conflict. There is ambiguity regarding whether Clement and fellow workers are directly involved in the conflict needing help or just peripherally involved because of the relationships that Euodia and Syntyche have in the Philippian church and Macedonian region in their “work of the gospel.” But either way, the relational break between these women had far-reaching effects. It is nearly “never” that our “spat” is between us only and it is “none of your business.” Other metaphors that Paul uses, particularly that of “body” readily give support to the inter-relatedness we have in our union together.

## Conflict’s Cause (vs 4-7)

As we move forward, we need to keep this context in place. It is often that these next verses are read as though they little to do with the verses preceding them. But actually the text moves forward in such a way that these next statements represent the mindset that should be involved in the reconciliation process. I want us to read them “backwards” and see them as being causal when they are absent in the realm of conflict. This section offers a set of pairs that are to be characteristic of those who “agree” in the work of the gospel. Let us present them as the cause of conflict that is inevitable to occur in their absence.

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

### Rejoice/Reasonableness

An attitude of rejoicing is to be at the center of life. Joy occurs when there is a settled confidence. A confidence in God’s care and power allows us to interpret the issues and problems of life. A life that is oriented around God’s care and character will place every issue in the context of God’s plans and purposes. When our desires are set aside to pursue His design, the likelihood of conflict is reduced. But when God is displaced as source of life, we elevate our self-centeredness which inevitably leads to conflict.

A sense of humility and reasonableness is to mark us as well. We should listen and reflect on the concerns surrounding us. Much of our strife is because of the failure to gather all of the necessary information and to be careful in our assessments. Bullheaded selfishness is the lead point for disagreement.

### Presence/Prayer

Knowing that God is with us and in the situation will help to reduce the emotional response to problems. It is imperative to live with the confidence that God is near and concerned. We communicate with him out of this assurance. Prayer is more a demonstration of reliance than it is a petition trying to convince God of a particular course of action. Our praying should flow out of a steadfast trust that what we need, God will provide. When we fail to pray, we in essence are self-reliant. As we are then confronted with situations that become unwieldy, our independence is challenged and we work harder to control our contexts. As we are faced with less control, we are more likely to see others as interference and challenge.

### Peace/Protection

I hope you are now seeing the God-centeredness of this section. Joy in God's care and character, assured dependence upon God's presence and provision and now a "settledness" in his protection and peace are all positioned around an approach to living that sees God as our focal point. There is a subtle difference in having a trust in God that allows us to move forward in troubled circumstances and a settled peace to rest in God's timing and care. Just as where our attitude of prayer demonstrates the position of our hearts, so to does our response to challenges. In the face of difficulty, we should cultivate a spirit of peace. For some a life tumult follows them continually. It may be couched in language of trust, but the heart of unsettledness is clearly seen. There is a place for lament, but it should not be the normal position for the believer who is living as a citizen, trusting the King of heaven to maintain the peace and safety of His subjects.

## **Conflict's Consummation (vs 8,9)**

*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.*

### **Orientation**

Because of the work of the Gospel in establishing a citizenship based upon the character of its King, there should be an orientation of thought that focuses on that virtue. Because the citizen should live in accord with this thinking and trust, because God is present and peaceable, the citizen should set his mind on this small exemplary list of values, things that are excellent and praise-worthy. We could spend time analyzing these terms but they carry into English well. Truth, honor, justice, purity, beauty, and esteemed are all qualities that should be pursued in this kingdom. When we are engaged in differences of opinion, often these concerns get placed in the rear. Think back to the recent election campaigns. How often did the rhetoric allow truth to be shrouded in slander. How frequently did righteousness get covered in innuendo. We could go on but the point is taken, we will often be caught up in the "war" and forget the virtue of even the noble soldier. Can we find the virtue even in our "opponent?"

### **Observation**

And he clearly states what we have asserted from the beginning that there is a clear modeling component to living as citizens. We learn to trust and be settled with this orientation of thought when we see it modeled for us. The converse then is we should be models for others as well. Walter Hansen puts it this way:

"To remind his readers of the transformative experience of receiving his teaching and observing his example Paul strings together four verbs: *you learned and you received and you heard and you saw*. The verbs *learned* and *received* refer primarily to his teaching of the gospel, and verbs *heard* and *seen* refer to the paradigmatic value of his life. But since Paul present his life story in parallel to the gospel narrative of Christ, this distinction between these verbs should not be pressed. ...Paul's command to *put it into practice*, challenges his readers to move beyond contemplation to action. The time has come to get out of the chair of theoretical reflection about Christ and the Christian and life and press on toward the goal...Paul sets before his students his art: his portrayal of the suffering of Christ and his participation in Christ's sufferings present what is most excellent and praiseworthy. He calls for believers to imitate him and acquire his art."

Enjoyment of the presence of the God of peace (and therefore conflict resolution) is experienced in this context. It is a gospel kind of peace. "Peace in the Biblical sense is nearly synonymous with messianic salvation. Through the Messiah, God will bring the condition of peace: reconciliation with God and harmony in all relationships. Peace is not so much a subjective tranquility as an objective reality created by the reign of God through the Messiah." We are brought back to the citizenship metaphor. The Philippian believers should not trust in Caesar to bring and maintain peace, but rather in the King of heaven where their real citizenship lies. His virtues as seen in the power of the Messiah-King, the crucified and risen Jesus, should be cultivated and promoted. These will be the evidence and witness of the power of the Gospel to all those around, both in the church and outside.

## Reflect and Respond

Although it is not directly derived from our text this evening, Ken Sande's approach to conflict resolution as published in *The Peacemaker* and disseminated in the many materials from Peacemaker Ministries, the 4G's of conflict resolution summarize this passage quite well. The orientation of "4 G's" is to present a mnemonic device to aid in learning and recall. The ABE class that has been studying the Peacemaker materials as part of the "Heart of the Chapel" series will find this an easy review.

The first "G" is to "Glorify God." This is evident from our passage where we asserted that when God is the center of citizenship, conflict is less likely to occur. It then should be obvious that to re-establish God as the center and pursuing his honor and glory will have significant impact on the resolution of conflict.

The second "G" is "Get the Log Out of Your Own Eye." Having a sense of reasonableness will remind us of our frailty and failure. When we enter into a

conflict situation with the attitude that we are the victim or even worse the executioner, the strife is exaggerated. Early in our presentation we asserted that God presents us with conflict to demonstrate his glory and power in the work of the Gospel. “Where in this do I need to change and grow” will go along way in the resolution of conflict.

The third “G”, “Gently Restore” reminds us that we are engaging people in real situations. Syzygus was to help but Euodia and Syntyche are people, with names, families, desires, past experiences and future hopes.

The fourth “G”, “Go and Be Reconciled” demonstrates the obvious. The goal is not to “win” but to be reconciled. Remember, we were not informed regarding the nature of these women’s divide. And they were not told to who was right. Don’t misinterpret, there are issues of right/wrong that require assessment and action. But there are many other times it is preference or misunderstanding that brings great grief.

How will children learn this? This memorable device is easy to memorize and rehearse. But don’t stop there, at the mere words, model it frequently.