

How a Family Fights Well

Great to see you guys this morning. If you have a bible with you, turn with me to Matthew 5. If you're joining us for the first time today, we are about halfway through a series called *Church is a Family*. In this series, we've been unpacking the ins and outs of how God intended a church to function. And specifically, how God intended our interpersonal relationships *within* the church to function. So the very first week, we explained that by far, the most popular metaphor in the bible to describe our relationships with one another is that of a *biological family*. And so we spent time talking about what "family" would've meant to Jesus—how in his day, family was actually an even *bigger* deal than it is today, because their culture was a very *familial* society. And then the second week, we talked about what *makes* us a family: how Jesus through the cross, makes it possible for very different people from very different backgrounds to all live together as a family. And then last week my buddy Dominique was here, and he talked about what it truly looks like to *love* one another as a family would. So that's where we've been so far.

But today, in light of all that, we've got one very important *practical* problem we need to solve together, regarding all of this. And here's the problem: **if we are called to live our lives in close proximity to one another on a regular basis, and we are called to do that with people who often are very different than us, one thing is almost certainly going to happen: conflict.** We are going to, at least occasionally, sin against one another, wrong one another, offend one another, and frustrate one another. All of that is inevitably going to occur as we go about life together as a church family.

And you know, one thing that I find so incredibly refreshing about the bible is that it doesn't even *attempt* to sugarcoat that. It doesn't for a *second* pretend that conflict doesn't occur between followers of Jesus. In the gospels, for instance, there are stories of the disciples arguing with one another about who is the greatest. Which seems like an odd argument to have when you're hanging out with Jesus, the Lord of the Universe—you'd think that would be a dead giveaway for which one was the greatest—but okay. But there, in all its gritty detail, is an account in the bible about followers of Jesus experiencing conflict with one another.¹

In another story, the *mother* of James and John—two of the disciples—she comes up to Jesus and asks that Jesus give both of her sons positions of authority in his coming kingdom. And then the other ten disciples catch wind of her doing this and are so mad.

¹ Mark 9:33-34; also Luke 22:24-30.

As they should be. It's like "dude, you got your *mom* to go to bat for you with Jesus? Really?" And as a result, *conflict* breaks out among the disciples once again, such that Jesus has to bring them all together and have a talk with them.²

In one account in Acts 15, it says that the apostle Paul and Barnabas had "such a sharp disagreement [with each other] that they *parted company*." Paul! As in, the guy who wrote *most of the New Testament* we hold in our hands, a lot of which is about *gospel reconciliation*. He and one of his closest companions have such intense *conflict* with one another that they end up going their *separate ways* for a bit.³

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, calls out two women in the church by name and says "will you please tell them to stop arguing and get along?"⁴ There's conflict in the book of Galatians, the book of 1 Corinthians, the book of Ephesians...I don't want to overmake my point, but the Bible is *abundantly honest* about the fact that there is regularly conflict between followers of Jesus. I always think it's funny when people say "I just want the Church today to be more like the early Church." It's like "you mean the one that fought all the time?" There were plenty of beautiful, compelling things about the early Church. And also, they were flawed human beings that had conflict with each other, just like we do. My point is simply this: in Scripture, conflict is an **expected part** of our relationships with other followers of Jesus. It *is absolutely going* to happen.

If for no other reason than conflict is just *part of* being a *family*. That's part of the deal, right? If you ever *think* you've found a *family* that doesn't have conflict, let me tell you what you've *actually* found. You've actually found either: 1) a family that is just *extraordinarily* good at *hiding* or *suppressing* their conflict, or 2) a family that isn't *close enough* to one another to *have* any conflict. Right? Because pretty much all families fight. Well, in the same way, if you ever find yourself in a *church* where there doesn't *seem* to be any conflict, you've either found a church that is very good at *hiding* and *suppressing* their conflict (which isn't great), or you've found a church that doesn't spend enough time with one another to have any conflict in the first place (which is arguably *worse*).

So for starters, it's worth considering that if you are experiencing conflict with other followers of Jesus, it's actually a sign that you're doing *something right*. Because that means on some level, you're spending enough time with one another to occasionally get

² Matthew 20:20-28.

³ Acts 15:36-41.

⁴ Philippians 4:2.

on each other's nerves. And spending time together is a *good* thing. We try to say this *often* around here, but the mark of church's maturity is not the **absence of conflict**, but **how conflict gets dealt with**. If you're looking for a church with no conflict, you're actually looking for the wrong thing. Rather, you should be looking for a church that *handles* conflict in mature, productive, Jesus-like sorts of ways. *That's* what we should be after. Does that make sense?

So the question that all of this brings us to is this: *how* do we navigate conflict *well* as followers of Jesus? How do we approach it in a way that is good for us, good for the other people involved, and good for our church as a whole? *How do we fight, well?* That's what I want us to consider today. To do that, we're going to look at two different passages. The first one is in Matthew 5. In this passage, Jesus is talking about the realities of anger and frustration towards other followers of Jesus, and these are the instructions he gives. Look with me in your bibles, starting in v. 23:

*[23] So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that **your brother has something against you**—*

Okay, stop right there for a second. "Offering your gift at the altar" was an ancient form of worship. It would be sort of like saying today, "if you are on your way to church," or "if you are approaching the tables in the back to take communion." "If you're preparing to worship," Jesus says, "and you realize "your brother has something against you," here's what you should do. Now, just to make sure we understand the situation he's describing, if "your brother has something *against you*," whose *fault* does that probably mean the *conflict* is? *Your* fault, right? If your brother is mad at *you*, that probably means *you wronged him* in some way, or at least he *thinks* you did. Jesus says in *that* scenario where the conflict is *our* fault, here's what we should do. Picking it back up in v. 24:

*[24] leave your gift there before the altar and go. **First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.***

Jesus says 'drop everything that you're doing—put everything on pause—until you can go and make things right between you and whoever the conflict is with.' Go and pursue reconciliation as quickly as you possibly can, so that things don't get worse *between* you and them. Jesus is well aware, as I think most of us are, that leaving conflict *unaddressed* only makes things worse. He is well aware that "time actually *does not* heal all wounds," especially when it comes to conflict and frustrations with other people. What usually happens is that time makes it *worse*. As time goes by, frustration calcifies into

bitterness, and bitterness into resentment. So Jesus says that we should short-circuit that whole horrible process. We should, as soon we are aware of conflict, stop what we're doing and go talk to the other person about it. So we might sum up these instructions from Matthew 5 with something like this: if the conflict is **your fault**, **you** go make it right.

Now *that* part probably makes logical sense to most of us. The *next* passage we cover, however, might not. Turn with me to Matthew 18, just a handful of pages to the right. In this passage, Jesus is *also* giving some practical instructions regarding conflict with other believers, but this time the circumstances are a little different. Take a look with me, at v. 15:

*"If your brother **sins against you** [meaning the conflict is *their* fault], **go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.***

Now the passage then goes on to describe what happens if that person *doesn't* listen when you bring it up. But for our purposes today, I just want us to focus on *this verse*, where it tells us what to do if the conflict is *the other person's* fault. It says if *that's* the case, *you* are *still* the one who should take responsibility to make it right. To summarize *this* one, if the conflict is the **other person's fault**, **you** go make it right.

So to recap, if the conflict is *your* fault, *you* go make it right. If the conflict is the *other* person's fault, *you* (still) go make it right. Jesus says that as his disciples, we should always take it upon *ourselves* in *every* scenario to work through conflict between us and other followers of Jesus. Jesus doesn't want any of his followers to shirk the responsibility to reconcile with others. Put simply, "they started it" is not a valid excuse in the kingdom of God. **Whether conflict is your fault, or their fault, or some of both** (and let's be honest, an awful lot of the time, it's both), **it is always your responsibility to initiate reconciliation.**

Now, to be sure, there will come times where you have done everything you possibly can to pursue reconciliation with another person, and they're just not interested in that. They won't get together with you, or they're continuing some type of overt abusive behavior, or whatever it is, and the relationship can't be reconciled. And you don't need to beat yourself up over that—Romans 12 says "*as far as it depends on you*, live peaceably with everyone." There may come a point in some relationships where it no longer depends on you. But in my experience, most of us stop well short of that. And that's the problem. **The**

Scriptures tell us that as long as we can do something about it—no matter whose fault it is—we should do something about it.

Now I think this approach to conflict—always seeing it as *your* responsibility to resolve it—raises a very *human* objection in most of us. Namely the question, “if the conflict wasn’t my *fault*, why should it be my *responsibility* to deal with it?” Right? That’s kind of a tough pill to swallow. If it’s not my fault—if the other person sinned against me, if they wronged *me*, if they gossiped about *me*—why in the world should it be on *me* to make the situation right? If it wasn’t my fault, why is it my responsibility?

And the reason is because if we are followers of Jesus, that is precisely what *Jesus* did for *us*. That is the very heart of the good news of Jesus: that **though our sin wasn’t Jesus’ fault, he decided to make it his responsibility**. Isaiah 53, one of the most vivid depictions of the gospel in all of the Scriptures, puts it like this:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Do you see this? The sin that separates us from God was not Jesus’ fault, but he chose to make it his responsibility, by going to the cross. If God approached conflict with *us* the way that *we* often approach conflict with others, there would *never* be right relationship between us and him. If God sat back and said “well, it’s *their fault*, they got themselves into this mess, so *they* need to come and make things right,” you and I would be stuck in our sin forever. But instead, what *God* did was that he took it upon himself to send Jesus to *initiate* and *pursue* reconciliation with us, through the cross. He endured the hurt that *our* sin caused. It wasn’t his *fault*, but he made it his *responsibility*.

And through that, what Jesus did is that he dealt with every opposition we might have to dealing with our own conflict. In the cross, Jesus broke the chains of our own self-righteousness, our frustration, our resentfulness, our apathy. Whatever it might be keeping us from reconciliation from others, Jesus tore that down through the cross. At the cross, he tore down the hold that all of that has on us. So right now, if you are a follower of Jesus and the other person you are in conflict with is a follower of Jesus, there is actually *nothing stopping you* from pursuing reconciliation with one another. I’m

not saying it necessarily will be instant or easy, but it is entirely *possible* because of Jesus.

God reconciled us to him and now we are called, as followers of Jesus, to reconcile with *others*. As *image bearers* of God, as his people who are called to represent him in both word and deed, we are called to the same posture. To pursue reconciliation with our church family, even if it was *entirely their fault* that the conflict exists. And what happens as we take that posture, is that we become the type of family that God created us to be. We become, not a conflict-free community, but one that handles conflict well, in *productive* ways, because of the gospel.

And here's the other thing I think we should realize—and it's something that so many people don't pick up on: it's not *just* that dealing with conflict is helpful at a corporate, *communal* level. It's also helpful *individually*. One thing you learn about living in community is that we grow the most by going **through conflict**, not **running from it**. As human beings, we spend so much of our time and energy *dodging* conflict with other people: ignoring it and neglecting to deal with it. But what we don't realize is that **when we dodge conflict, we also dodge one of the primary means God uses to grow and mature us** as human beings. Joseph Hellerman in his book *When the Church Was a Family* articulates it like this. This quote is so very long, but so very good:

Spiritual formation [by which he means the process by which we become more like Jesus] **occurs primarily in the context of community**. People who remain connected with their brothers and sisters in the local church almost invariably grow in **self-understanding**, and they **mature in their ability to relate in healthy ways to God and to their fellow human beings**. This is **especially the case for those courageous Christians who stick it out through the often messy process of interpersonal discord and conflict resolution**. **Long-term interpersonal relationships** are the crucible of genuine progress in the Christian life. People who stay also grow. People who leave do not grow. We all know people who are consumed with spiritual wanderlust. But we never get to know them very well because they cannot seem to stay put. They move along from church to church, ever searching for a congregation that will better satisfy their felt needs. Like trees repeatedly transplanted from soil to soil, these spiritual nomads fail to put down roots and seldom experience lasting and fruitful growth in their Christian lives.

Here's the reality: **God puts other followers of Jesus in our lives to help us grow. Just by living in relationship with them, they help us grow our understanding of**

God, ourselves, and one another. So the more time you spend with other followers of Jesus, the more you will *grow* as a result of those relationships. The more you *stick it out* through conflict and resolving conflict with other followers of Jesus, the more you *grow* as a result of that process. But if you bail on those relationships, you also bail on aspects of your own growth and maturity.

The book of Proverbs uses the imagery of “iron sharpening iron” to depict this process.⁵ Think about that image. The idea is that if you are sharpening a tool or a weapon made out of metal, you generally need another type of *metal* to do it. And generally speaking, when one metal sharpens another, what happens? Sparks fly, right? It’s an *intense* process. But as a *result* of that process, whatever you’re sharpening becomes more *effective*, becomes more of what it was designed to be. That’s the picture given in the Scriptures for how our relationships with *one another* work. Occasionally, if we’re doing it right, *sparks will fly*. But that’s actually a good thing when it’s handled the right way.

Unfortunately, for far too many people, when the first hint of sparks start to fly, at the first sign of interpersonal conflict, they run from it. They start to daydream about what it would look like to be a part of *other, new* relationships where there *isn’t* that same conflict or frustration. And eventually, the end up moving on to another friendship, or another community, or another church, or even another city.

And let me just say, loud and clear: *I get it*. I get why, when we experience conflict, it is easier to just move on from those relationships and be done with them. Deep, meaningful relationships are *messy*. Some of our *deepest wounds* come from those we are *closest to*. And when those wounds happen, it is so easy to just run from the relationship that caused them—that is far *easier* to do. But **as with a lot of things in life, the easiest thing to do is often not the best thing**. And the things that matter the most often require hard work. And that’s certainly true when it comes to relationships with other followers of Jesus. That’s why Jesus wants us to learn how to handle conflict well.

So, we’ve discussed *what* to do about conflict, and we’ve discussed *why* it’s important that we learn how to do that. But before we’re done, I just want to talk about *how* we go about addressing conflict. Because conceivably, there is a way to discuss conflict with another person, and yet still *go about it* in a really unhelpful way. Just to prove it to you, a while back, I went and preached a version of this message—about addressing conflict—at a friend of mine’s church. And my friend called me later in the week and said

⁵ Proverbs 27:17

“hey man—thanks a lot for saying what you said last Sunday. As a result of that message, I had someone else at our church come and yell at me for twenty minutes straight about all the ways I had hurt them.” Apparently when I said “go and work towards reconciliation,” this person from this church thought I said “go and yell at the person you’re angry at.” That is a very strategic misinterpretation of what I said.

So apparently, there’s a way to do this in a really unhelpful ways. So let’s talk for just a few about how to do it *helpfully*. Let’s talk about the *posture we take* when we go to deal with conflict between us and other people. How do we approach these conversations productively? I think there are two phrases that should describe our mindset: a *self-examining* posture, and a *generous* posture. One of these has to do with how we view *ourselves*, and the other has to do with how we view *the other person*. Let’s look briefly at each.

A Self-Examining Posture

I get this from several places in the Scriptures. One is Jesus’ instructions from Matthew 7, v. 3 and following:

*Why do you see the **speck** that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the **log** that is in **your own eye**? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, **first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.***

So Jesus is employing this analogy about logs and specks to illustrate *how* we should talk to other people about their sin or about conflict we’re having with them. He says if you’re trying to help your brother get a speck of dust out of his eye, but you’ve got an entire log sticking out of your eye, that’s not going to go well. You’re not going to be very successful at what you’re trying to do. Translation, if you’re trying to get someone else to see how they’re off in a particular scenario, but you’re refusing to acknowledge how *you* also might be off, that’s not gonna go so great either. You’re going to be way more condescending, way more self-righteous about things than you need to be. So instead, what you should do is first *examine yourself*, deal with the log in *your own eye*, and then you’ll be able to more helpfully address the speck in your brother’s eye.

So practically, here’s what this means. When you are in conflict with another follower of Jesus, before coming at them about their sin or their fault in the matter, first ask yourself,

“where might *I* be at fault here?” “Where might *I* not be seeing things clearly?” “Where might *my sin* be clouding my judgment in this situation?” Ask *yourself* those questions—and maybe even get a third party to help you discern where you are off. Consider first whether there is any part of the conflict that is due to *your own* sin.

And it might be that your sin is a *small fraction* of the problem. The conflict might be only 1% due to your sin. But even if it’s only 1%, you take that 1% seriously. Deal with it, seek repentance in that area, and *then* you will “see more clearly” to speak to your brother about his sin in the matter. Do you see how this works? If you sit down for a second and honestly pray through questions like that before you go and address any conflict with other people, I will just about guarantee you that the conversation will go better with that person than if you hadn’t. That’s a *self-examining* posture. Second...

A Generous Posture

This one has to do with how we see the *other* person in the conflict. So often in our conflict with other people, things are complicated by us assuming the worst of the other person. We find ourselves hurt not only by the other person’s *actions*, but by what we *assume* the *motives* were for their actions. We assume that we know *exactly why* they did whatever they did. And usually, we assign one of the worst possible motives we could assign to them. I did this just a few weeks ago and had to apologize for it. A good friend of mine did something, and it was hurtful to me, but instead of focusing on the hurt itself and talking to them mainly about that, I chose to assign the worst possible motive to what they did. And so I had to own up to that and apologize for it. Because jumping to conclusions is no way to treat another follower of Jesus.

So what I would encourage us to do is to, as much as possible, give the other person the benefit of the doubt. If there are obvious hurtful *actions* of theirs that need to be brought up, bring *those* up. But don’t make assumptions about what the *motives* were behind their actions. If someone talked about you without you being present, don’t assume they did it maliciously. If someone cancelled on you last minute, don’t assume that they did that because they’re avoiding you. If someone didn’t invite you to something, don’t assume it was just to spite you. There are so many other possible reasons for each of those things happening. Don’t automatically jump to assuming the worst, most malicious motive.

So I think with those two things—a self-examining posture and a generous posture—we at least have a *recipe* for approaching conflict well in our midst. I’m not saying doing those

two things *guarantee* the conversations will go well. But I am saying they have a lot more chance of going well than if you don't do those things. Make sense?

So here's my final plea to all of us: let's be a church family that fights well. Let's be a church family that navigates conflict well. And as we do, let's remember that families *are going* to fight. Even as we experience frustration and exhaustion from conflict with one another, let's remember that if we *weren't* experiencing conflict, that would be a far worse sign. The fact that we are occasionally experiencing tension with one another means that on some level, we are living life together as a family. Families fight, no matter what. So let's fight well.

So here's what I want to do today. We always have a time of response after the teaching each Sunday, but this morning I want us to get really specific with it. Jesus says in Matthew 5 that if we are going to the altar—if we are preparing to worship—and we “realize that our brother has something against us”—we should go and deal with it immediately. He says we should stop everything that we're doing, because going and reconciling with our brother is every bit as much a part of worship as singing a song or offering a gift at the altar is.

So if you're here today, and you know for a fact that there is something between you and another follower of Jesus—I want us to deal with that as our act of worship. Before we go and take communion or sing to Jesus like everything is totally cool, let's examine whether there's something that needs to be addressed between us and somebody else. Whether it's outright conflict or anger or bitterness, or maybe just some tension or awkwardness or weirdness between you. Even if you're not 100% that something is off, I'll go ahead and tell you: it's a lot better to go and talk to them about it and them say “oh no—we're totally good” than it is to not address it and find out weeks or months later that there was something there that needed addressing.

The hope would be that we are doing this *every* Sunday: that we are *always* examining ourselves when we're here and dealing with any conflict. But specifically today, if there is something between you and somebody else, go deal with it. Before you sing any songs, before you take communion, before you do anything else, in Jesus' words, “go and be reconciled to your brother or your sister.” Let's be actual family together this morning, because Jesus makes it possible. Jesus made it his responsibility, even when it wasn't his fault. So this morning, whether it's your fault or not, make it your responsibility. Go find that person if they're here, grab a corner of the room or some open floor-space, or the front patio—whatever you need to do, and go deal with whatever needs to be dealt

with. If the person *isn't* here, go outside and give them a call. Send them a text and say “let’s talk this week–don’t let me forget.” Whatever you need to do, let’s be family together this morning. Deal?