

Rethinking Your Conflicts

A Study of Philippians 4:1-3

Characteristic of Completeness: Peace

Big Idea: We're going to have to die to live as one.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 133:1-3; John 17:20-21; Romans 12:16-18; 15:5; 1 Corinthians 1:10; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Ephesians 4:1-3; Philippians 1:27; 2:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:13; 1 Peter 3:8-9

Introduction:

- A. I sat across from the man, some Mexican food between us for lunch. After some small talk, he awkwardly got to the point: "Bob," he said, "the reason I asked you to lunch is to tell you in person that we're leaving the church."

He caught me in the middle of my taco. I swallowed hard. "Why?" I asked. "Is there something I can learn from this?"

"Well," he said, "we love your preaching and we deeply appreciate all the church has done for my family, but my wife had a falling out with a good friend of hers in the church. They just can't get along and so we've made the decision: We're leaving."

I urged the man to work through the interpersonal conflict toward reconciliation and offered to help in the process. He thanked me and said he would let his wife know about my offer. I never heard from them again.

I'm afraid the only thing uncommon about this situation that happened years ago is that the guy was up-front about it and let me know. Many just slip out without saying a word.

Interpersonal conflict is common, even in the church. When it comes to negotiating conflict, well done is rare. Our tendency is to run or retaliate rather than resolve. But running and retaliating hinders rather than helps. It hinders the opportunity for God to shape us through the conflict. We miss the lessons God may have for us and our opponents. More importantly, we rob the world of an opportunity to see Christ in us as we do the hard work of getting along.

- B. On the night before Jesus was to be crucified, He prayed. A man doesn't pray frivolous prayers when he knows he's about to be crucified; he cuts right to what matters most. Jesus prayed for the disciples who were with Him and for all of us ever since who believe in Jesus for eternal life.

He prayed for unity. He prayed that we would get along. Oneness was and is important to Jesus because His name is on the line. Christ envisioned that our ability to get along and work together would be so extraordinary that it would actually invite people to believe in Him. In ► John 17:20-21, Jesus prays to the Father:

^{NAU} John 17:20 “I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; 21 that they may all be one; even as You, Father, *are* in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.”

I’ll be honest with you: At my lowest points, as I look across the landscape of Christianity today, I’m tempted to think that the Father is simply not answering the Son’s prayer for unity. Where’s the unity? Divorce rates aren’t lower among Christians. When’s the last time you heard something like, “Wow, those Christians are so unified it makes me want to investigate the claims of Christ.”

And yet, I see flashes of unity that show the tremendous potential. I see some couples working hard on their marriages. I see some pulling together to feed the hungry. I see some Life Groups caring for one another. I see some willing to humbly and unselfishly step into the pain of conflict resolution for the greater good.

- C. My ► sermon today is about how to deal with interpersonal conflict. Our ► Characteristic of Completeness is peace—the virtue of living in harmony with others. Our text is ► Philippians 4:1-3, where the Apostle Paul says,

^{NAU} Philippians 4:1 Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long *to see*, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved. ► 2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord. ► 3 Indeed, true companion, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in *the cause of* the gospel, together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

In this text, Paul certainly doesn’t present everything there is to know about conflict resolution. But he does give ► three important guidelines that help us.

- I. First, in the midst of interpersonal conflict, Paul ► models loving confrontation, not passivity. He confronts. Our temptation is to ignore interpersonal problems in the hope that they will somehow just go away. They don’t.

Interpersonal conflicts are like slivers in your hand. They can only be safely ignored if they are so small and so superficial that they didn’t really penetrate—they didn’t really hurt in the first place. All the others—the ones that hurt going in and still hurt to touch—need to be removed. The removal is painful. And sometimes you need another person to help you. But you do it, because to do nothing is to risk an infection that can spread, jeopardizing the entire body.

Paul confronts tenderly, but directly.

- A. You can’t get much more direct than calling out two women by name. In ► Verse 2, Paul says,

^{NAU} Philippians 4:2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord.

1. Paul is not afraid to point out the elephant in the room. Euodia and Syntyche aren't getting along. Everybody in the Philippian church knows it. So he appeals to them directly. He's not some tactless bull in a china shop. But neither is he some tip-toeing politician. The church is a family, and Paul confronts his family members directly.
2. Ever wonder why the Bible points to Adam and not Eve as being responsible for the fall? After all, wasn't it Eve that ate the forbidden fruit first? What's up with that?

Two words: "with her." Genesis 3:6 tells us that during the time when the serpent was conversing with Eve, tempting her to eat the forbidden fruit, Adam was "with her." He watched the whole thing unfold. He watched the deception. He watched his wife first be tempted and then reach for the forbidden fruit. He watched her eat it. And he remained silent.

Adam's silence was the first sin. The fall of man can be traced to Adam's failure to confront.

Paul breaks Adam's silence and confronts directly.

- B. But notice at the same time the terms of endearment and affection that introduce Paul's direct statement. In ► Verse 1 he says,

^{NAU} Philippians 4:1 Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long *to see*, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.

The term ► "brethren" is not intended to be gender specific; it addresses all believers in the church at Philippi, including Euodia and Syntyche. Twice ► Paul says they are his beloved. He says ► he longs to see them. He calls them ► his joy. He says they are ► his crown, which is a way of saying he's proud of them.

I think Paul wants to minimize the possibility that his upcoming directness will be misconstrued as an attempt to harm. This is important. Directness is so rare that people often assume that it must be malicious. Sometimes it seems like the only time people say what they really mean is when they are uncontrollably angry and vengeful. So we mistakenly assume that when somebody confronts us directly, they must be trying to harm us.

So, in our confrontation, it is wise to first convey our love and desire to do good and not harm.

Paul's words, by the way, do not constitute a rote formula. For example, in the midst of a conflict with another person, I don't have to say, "I long to see you" when, the truth is, I don't. The idea is to convey a tender, gracious, loving attitude as much as possible, so the other person does not mistake my directness for malice.

II. In ► addition to confronting in love, Paul does something else that is important in resolving conflicts within the Church. He ► emphasizes the team. He says that we're in this together; we're a family. He wants to show these two women that he's not just in their face, he's in their corner.

A. In ► Verse 2, Paul says,

Philippians 4:2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord.

The repeat the word ► "urge" is grammatically unnecessary, but Paul does it to emphasize the action of the verb. The Greek word is *parakaleo*. It basically means to call someone to one's side.¹ It could be loosely translated, "Let's get together," or "Join me," or "Stand beside me."

That Paul repeats the verb for both Euodia and Syntyche implies something else, too: Both parties share the responsibility for conflict resolution and reconciliation. Regardless of who offended who, regardless of who's right and who's wrong, both share the responsibility for working it out. The popular notion that the offending party bears sole responsibility for initiating conflict resolution is not biblical. Jesus says in Matthew 18:15:

^{NJ}Matthew 18:15 ". . . if your brother sins against you, go and tell him . . ."

B. Also, I want you to notice the following words Paul uses in ► Verse 3:

"companion" = σύζυγε
 "help" = συλλαμβάνου
 "struggle" = συνήθησάν
 "fellow workers" = συνεργών

The English words don't show it, but ► all the corresponding Greek words begin with the same letters. It's a prefixed preposition that means ► "together with." So, by the words he chooses, Paul is further emphasizing the togetherness of the church team.

C. The team is further emphasized in ► Verse 3 when Paul enlists another church family member to help Euodia and Syntyche. He says,

¹ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, s.v. "παρακαλέω," (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

^{NAU} Philippians 4:3 Indeed, true companion, I ask you also to help these women . . .

Here, Paul is asking someone else to help. But we can't be sure who the person is. There are a number of interpretive options.

1. Paul may be referring to some unnamed person that would be widely recognized by the Philippians upon the simple description of him or her as a "true companion."
2. Or perhaps the person is unnamed because Paul doesn't have any particular person in mind, but uses the singular to address any one of his true companions who are in a position to help.
3. Or, it is possible that the Greek word translated "companion" is actually a proper name. In English, as in Greek, we have proper names that can be taken two ways. Like "Hunter." Or "Victor."

In any case, the idea is that conflict resolution is a family matter that may need the help of some other family members. We're a team.

- D. Finally, in ► Verse 3, Paul speaks of all those in the church at Philippi as believers "whose names are written in the book of life." The book of life is a kind of family album that contains the names of all those who are heaven-bound because they have believed in Jesus for eternal life. Paul's basic idea is that we believers better do everything we can to get on the same page because we're in the same book. You can choose your friends, but you're stuck with family. And healthy families are not defined by the absence of conflict, but by the way that they work through it.
- III. So in review, Paul ► models for us two important aspects of conflict resolution: confront in love, and emphasize the team. There is a third and final aspect that Paul models for us: He calls us ► to remember our purpose. He calls for a subordination of self for the cause of Christ. Let me show you what I mean.
- A. Before confronting the two women specifically, Paul issues this general command to all believers in ► Verse 1:

^{NAU} Philippians 4:1 . . . stand firm in the Lord . . .

This sounds a bit like church language. You know, church language is the stuff we say because it sounds good, but it's so broad and nebulous that nobody really knows for sure what it means. By itself, this command sounds general and perhaps even vague, but Paul points us back to something specific he's talking about. He uses two literary devices to point us backward.

1. Verse 1 begins with the word, ► “therefore.” It’s a transitional word that links what is about to be said with what has already been said before.
2. Also, Paul says we are to stand firm in the Lord ► “in this way,” which points back to a way that he has already explained. I think Paul is pointing ► back at least as far as Philippians 3:17-21, where he begins by saying,

^{NAU} Philippians 3:17 Brethren, join in following my example . . .

Sounds like *parakaleo*—calling alongside. You may recall in studying this preceding context a few weeks ago, Paul calls believers to join him in recognizing that our citizenship is in heaven, not on earth. We’re here to represent Christ well on earth. Not to make a name for ourselves. Not to make ourselves comfortable. Remember, the big idea was: Don’t make yourself at home; we’re not there yet.

You may also recall I illustrated it by saying that, when my employer sends me on a business trip, he doesn’t want me to spend all my time sprucing up my hotel room. And that’s exactly what some of us do. We’re so busy trying to upgrade, decorate, expand, accessorize, and equip our earthly hotel room we forget we’re on a heavenly business trip. A trip away from our heavenly home. A trip with some heavenly business to conduct. At trip that’s going to be over soon when we check out and see the big Boss up in the home office.

We could extend the illustration to our present text. When the boss sends me on a business trip, neither does he want me to waste all my time in conflict with fellow workers. It’s not going to get the job done. My primary job is not to assert my rights or to vindicate myself or to be sure I’m fulfilled or to make sure I look good or to get my way or to be esteemed or to advance my career. My primary job is to team with other believers to represent the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul reminds the Philippians of this in ► Verse 3, when he says,

^{NAU} Philippians 4:3 . . . help these women who have shared my struggle in *the cause of the gospel* . . .

That’s why we’re here: for the cause of the gospel.

- B. This helps us understand ► the specific command to Euodia and Syntyche in Verse 2:

^{NAU} Philippians 4:2 . . . to live in harmony in the Lord.

This translation, “to live in harmony,” may sound like all Paul is calling them to do is be nice and not fight. But he is calling for much more.

A literal translation of the Greek phrase is ► “to think the same thing.” Some other English translations render it “to be of the same mind” or “to agree.” And this raises the question: Agree on what? Think the same thing about what?

The context indicates that we should agree on our purpose in the Lord. We should think the same thing about why we’re here. It is for the cause of the gospel. It is to represent Christ well.

- C. Agreeing on this purpose does a number of things.
 - 1. It elevates the urgency and goal of conflict resolution. It’s not just about some petty personal vindication; there’s much more at stake: the very reputation of Christ.
 - 2. Also, if we can agree that our overriding cause is the gospel of Christ, then this actually frees us to agreeably disagree on a host of smaller things without hindering our partnership in the one big thing.
- IV. In sum, Paul models ► three things that help us negotiate conflict resolution: confront in love, emphasize the team, and remember our purpose.

- A. What do these three things have in common? They all demand that I die to myself.

I don’t want to confront in love. I’d rather run in fear or fight to win.

I don’t want to emphasize the team. I’d rather think of Christianity as catering to my individual needs, not as a collective responsibility to be the body of Christ on earth.

I don’t want to remember our purpose. I want to advance my agenda. I want to protect myself. I want it to be about me.

In all these ways, I must die to myself. And so, if I were to boil our text down to a single big idea, here’s what ► I’d say: We’re going to have to die to live as one. We’re going to have to die to our selfish ambitions. We’re going to have to die to our personal agendas. We’re going to have to die to our self-protective games. This is an echo of earlier themes.

► ^{NAU} Philippians 1:21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

► ^{NAU} Philippians 2:3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do

not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

▶^{NAU} Philippians 2:8 . . . He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

▶^{NAU} Philippians 3:7 But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

We're going to have to die to live as one. Paul ▶ has simply modeled for us three ways to die: confront in love, emphasize the team, and remember our purpose.

B. I am concerned that some may take this in an unbalanced way, picking out parts that play to their own weaknesses.

1. For example, I'm concerned about those of you who are the enablers, the people pleasers, the golden retrievers, the merciful ones who tend to let people use and abuse you.

I'm afraid you are listening to this sermon and saying to yourselves, ▶
“Emphasize the team and remember our purpose. Well, I guess that means I just have to put up with the abuse.”

No, it doesn't. More likely, it means that you're overlooking ▶ the first part: Confront in love. In the face of wrongdoing and abuse, don't fall into the silence of Adam. Don't enable family dysfunction; lovingly confront it. This may include drawing some firm relational boundaries.

In the most extreme cases, Matthew 18 lays out a process to deal with abusers who stubbornly refuse to play right with the team and refuse to surrender to the cause of Christ. It's an extended process that enlists the help of godly leaders. And it's a process that may culminate in the ultimate boundary: I not going to have a relationship with you unless and until you repent.

2. I am equally concerned about those of you who are like me—the drivers, the type-A's, the perfectionists, the knit-pickers, the ambitious ones who might be imbalanced in a different way.

You might ▶ only be hearing the word, “confront,” and embark on some personal crusade to get other people to shape up. You may view this as your green light to get people to think and act the way you do.

It's not. Perhaps ▶ you've overlooked the in-love part of confronting. Perhaps you need to emphasize the team and remember our purpose. It's not about you. It's about representing Christ together.

3. I am also concerned for those of you who may feel like it's your responsibility to be reconciled in the midst of interpersonal conflict. That's half right. It's your responsibility to do your part—to do all you can—to be reconciled with another. What the other person chooses to do is beyond your control. Romans ► 12:18 tell us,

^{NAU} Romans 12:18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

Sometimes it's not possible because it doesn't all depend on you.

- C. Well, ► what relational conflicts do you face today with fellow believers? Maybe it's a spouse. Or a parent. Or a child. Or the in-laws. Or someone in your Life Group. Or a friend. Or a partner.

We're going to have to die to live as one.

- D. We're going have communion this morning. And I invite you to use communion as an opportunity to apply this big idea to your life.

Communion is intended to be a worshipful time to remember what God has done for us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is also a time of self-examination before God, and that would include examining your relationship with others.

Jesus says something about the relationship between worshiping Him—through things like communion—and our relationship with others. In ► Matthew 5:23-24, He says,

^{NAU} Matthew 5:23 “Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”

As you remember how Jesus died, consider how you may need to die. As a part of communion, quietly and prayerfully ask God the following question: ► Is there some interpersonal conflict in my life that is unresolved because of my sin? It may be the silence of Adam, or the stroke of Cain.

If the answer is yes—if a brother or sister does have something legitimate against you—leave the elements alone this morning. Confess your wrongdoing to God. And don't take communion unless and until you've done what you can to make it right. First do all you can to be reconciled, then come to the Lord's Supper.