
UNBROKEN JOY
7 KEYS FOR RESOLVING CONFLICT
Philippians 4:1-3

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. 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.

Today's message addresses the issue of resolving conflict. Do you ever need help just getting along? Is there anyone here who would say "Yeah, that would help me on more than one occasion?" Well, today's message is for you. It's not just for you individually. It's not just for you in terms of your interpersonal relationships. It's for the Church. God has given a glorious mission to the Church of Jesus Christ. It is a critically important mission. We have been called to receive the gift of salvation, the forgiveness of our sins, eternal life, and to take that very message to the end of the Earth. We cannot afford the distraction of unresolved conflict. In fact, the message that we have believed, the message we know to be true, and that we share with others is that we have peace with God through Jesus Christ. We have a changed relationship with God. We had a problem, a serious problem of sin, and God's just judgment against that sin. Jesus has paid the price of that and removed it, and we have been restored into a right relationship with God. We have peace with God. Through that relationship - listen - through that relationship, all of these relationships are changed. They are transformed. The way we connect is now different because of what God has done as a gift in our lives. So, by way of implication, the very thought that we don't get along with one another, that we are alright with ongoing, unresolved conflict, is contrary to our very identity as Christians.

It's an important message for us in life, but also for us as Christians in the Church. And Paul has given us in Philippians a theological foundation, if you will - a theological foundation for getting along. He has spoken to us about how Jesus has removed that which separates us from God, and how he has modeled for us humility and servanthood. He has given us the theological truths and the examples that would help us walk in humble service to one another and in love with one another in community. Now, he addresses a very specific situation. He addresses two leaders in the church, two women who are in some form of conflict, and he practically walks them through

toward the goal of reconciliation, getting along. What we have is Paul taking those theological truths and showing us how to practically apply them, so that it's not just "here," but it's "out here" with hands and feet, showing us how to do this.

I came to the breakfast table one day this week to discover that on my plate were banana walnut muffins. That may sound good, but they were leftovers and they were a little dried out. Then I discovered that on other plates there were sticky buns. I'm not sure who made the decision here. I got dried out walnut muffins; other people got sticky buns, to which my lovely wife said, "Hey, you're late to the table." We laugh about it in the moment, but you know, there are some days when you just say, "I'm not putting up with this." There are some days when you say, "No - how come I always get the walnut muffins?!" It sounds just ridiculous: the fact that this beautiful woman married me to start with and even makes muffins and sticky buns. I should just be grateful. I should just shut up and show up.

I don't know why it is that on some days we laugh at it, other days we are offended. I don't want to imply that every time we have a division it's over something that's silly, but many times -- you know this is true -- many times in our closest relationships, our arguments go on and on and on over the most ridiculous things. You will find yourself saying to a friend, "You know, I had this fight with my wife and it just started over something ridiculous." It points to our challenge in just living life considering others, preferring others, loving others, and getting along. Evidently, we have two strong, prominent, mature individuals in the church at Philippi who are not getting along, so Paul gives us some practical keys. The first few are very practical. The last few grow in importance and in spiritual content.

Let's start with #1.

1. Admit that you are in conflict. Admit that you are in conflict. Can you imagine that you are in the church at Philippi 2000 years ago? The Apostle Paul sends a letter, and that letter gets read out loud. As this letter is being read, Paul starts talking about unity, and getting along, and following the example of Christ, standing firm for the truth, and you are there. You are Euodia. Her name, by the way, means "success." Syntyche - her name means "lucky." So, what you have is "Success" and "Lucky" not getting along. Maybe Success thought Lucky didn't really work hard enough for where she got to be. You have these two individuals. If you're one of them, and you are a follower of Jesus Christ, and there is this talk about unity as Paul's letter is being read, just maybe this little conviction starts rising up in your heart. Can you imagine what it would have been like for your names to be read out loud in front of the whole church? Wow. "Lord, help Tim and Navin to get along." Right? I

mean, it's a horrifying moment, you would think.

Paul is dealing with the elephant in the room. The entire church knows that these two very visible leaders are not right with one another, so he just deals with it. Are you one of those people? You know, you're offended at someone and someone comes and says, "Hey, are you alright?" "Oh, I'm fine. I'm fine." Are you that person in your marriage where your mate says to you, "Hey, Sweetheart, is everything okay?" "I'm fine." Or, the teenager to your parent: "Honey, are you okay?" "I'm fine." It begins by admitting that you are not fine. There is a point where we just need to be honest and say, "Yeah, there's a conflict here." Conflict, when properly resolved, leads to growth. Denial of conflict often leads to atrophy. When we have some friction and we push it away and act like it's not there, like an unused muscle, it will shrink. Our characters will shrink. Many times, in fact, growth will only come as we admit that we are in conflict.

I spoke with a leader today, a leader of another ministry in another church. He said that their organization was not growing. It had grown to a certain point because the leader so feared conflict, and did everything he could to avoid conflict that the organization had ceased to grow and had begun to decline. Number 1 - admit that you are in conflict.

2. Look for points of agreement. Look for points of agreement. In verse 2, Paul says, "I entreat you to agree in the Lord," literally - "to have the same mind." Find that which you agree upon. Start there. Focus upon that. If you have a history together, if you have equity that you have invested in the relationship, that strengthens you. We use a phrase to talk about delivering a hard message. Before you try to take a heavy load over the river, you need to build a strong bridge. If you have done that, those points of agreement give you strength in relationship and they help you. Look for points of agreement.

Have you ever been to a funeral, a wedding or a graduation - one of those big moments in life - and there are family members that are at odds with one another? So much so, that sometimes they don't even show up. They won't come to the wedding because they will have to see Uncle So-and-so. I understand that sometimes those kinds of conflicts point to big problems, but I am amazed as a pastor how many times I am in those settings and I find out that the real issue can easily be resolved. At some point you have to step back and say, "Look at what we share in common!" "Look, we are of the same blood. We did this together. We experienced this together." Look for points of agreement. Don't close your spirit to the other person.

#1 - Admit that you are in conflict. #2 - Look for points of agreement. #3 is very practical,

very helpful.

3. Get help. In verse 3 Paul talks about an unidentified person he calls his true companion. He says, "Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women." This is very wise advice. If you are in a conflict and you are not getting along, get someone to sit with you. Get a referee. Get someone who will come in, help you understand one another, help you communicate, help you work toward the goal of getting along. As a couple, it is so wise to have other couples in your life who will just share life with you, and that you can openly talk to about your conflict, your highs, your lows, and everything in between. It's very wise to find individuals who are a little bit ahead of you, a little bit older, maybe a little bit wiser, but definitely more experienced. They can help you anticipate some of what you will experience as a couple.

It is very important, before we leave this third point, just to identify that I know in my life God has blessed me with friends. When I come to them, they will point me in the right direction. Do you know what I mean? You have those individuals in your life. If you are having a conflict with your spouse, there is the friend that you go to that turns you back toward your spouse. Then there is potentially the friend that agrees with you, tells you, "What kind of nerve does she have? You shouldn't put up with that." That friend is not a good friend in that moment. It's not helpful. You need those individuals who help you by saying, "Listen, Brian, you know how you can be." Right? We need the person who will say to us, "Listen: love your dad. Love your mom. Honor them in their old age. This is the disease speaking, not them. I know it's difficult. I am here. I want to hold your hand." They don't allow you at this point in the journey to embrace an offense against your mom or dad, or any relationship. It's very simple. In your marriage, in your family, in your extended family, in your church, in your business - the enemy is out to divide you relationally, and Jesus Christ is out to unite you relationally. Get help.

4. Capitalize on your shared past. Capitalize on your shared past. In verse 3, as he entreats these women, he then says, "...help these women, my true companion, those who have (look at this phrase) labored side by side with me in the gospel."

I love the story of the building of the church at Philippi. When you read the book of Acts, it is so entertaining and exciting as the early church is being built. There is the Jerusalem church. The Spirit of God is poured out. Thousands are saved in a single day. It's magnificent. There is the church at Antioch. It's in this critical position. It's very diverse,

and they become the sending center to Europe. They send out Paul, and the mission teams, and Barnabas - just a critical man for a critical moment in time -- he comes to Antioch and he is used of God. I believe in many ways, Riverside, you are an Antioch church. You are diverse, and you are in a critical point for, well, for the lives of a lot of people. Then there are the Ephesian elders saying goodbye to Paul for the very last time. They are weeping, and he is giving them pastoral instruction. There are these various churches at various moments.

But when you come to the planting, the beginning of the church at Philippi, it's one of the best stories in the book of Acts. Do you remember Lydia? This prominent businesswoman is saved by the river. She probably hosted the early church as they met in her home. And there was the demonized girl, this girl who was enslaved. She would tell the fortunes of other people. In a very strange turn of events, Paul gets aggravated with her following them and shouting out, "These men are servants of the Most High God." In a moment, it seems like -- I know it doesn't fit for us spiritually -- but it seems like in a moment of irritation, Paul casts out the demon. And that did not go well, because the individuals who owned her - I know how inappropriate that is, but it was the reality of the moment and of the day - they were upset because their profit-making person was now set free. Next thing you know, they are in prison. Like you and me -- if we were in prison they did exactly what we would do -- they were singing praises to God. There they are, singing to the Lord, celebrating. There is an earthquake. They get miraculously released. They don't leave. The jailor, instead of killing himself, gets converted. His whole house gets converted. This is amazing! Paul is drawing on these shared life experiences, on the equity that they have in their relationship, looking at their points of agreement, building together.

Relationships are a lot like golf. You know, golf is a cruel game. You play 18 holes. You have to get the ball in every hole. You can play so well for 17 holes, then you get to that last hole. There is no limit to how many times it will take you to get into that hole the last time. You can destroy a great round in one hole of golf, in the last hole. It's that way in life. You can have a great relationship, a great friendship, a great shared past, but you have to battle for it every day. You have to work at your marriage every day. You have to work at your friendships every day. You have to work at meaningful relationships in terms of church life, and community, and business. It's tragic, but we can throw it all away in a moment. So capitalize on your shared past.

Let me give you the last three points together, because I think they move into something that's a

little more substantive. The first four are very practical and necessary, but now let's look at the last three: #5 - Draw near to Christ, according to the gospel. #6 - Consider eternity. #7 - Over-communicate affection. Let's begin with #5.

5. Draw near to Christ, according the gospel. Notice in verse 2, as Paul entreats these two women he says, "I entreat you to agree..." and how does he finish it? "I entreat you to agree in the Lord." You see he is appealing to the fact that their relationship is in Christ, that they have been changed by knowing Christ and what Christ has done in their life.

I was conversing with a gentleman this week who was counseling someone. He said that a woman had gone to her pastor and she said, "Pastor, the closer I get to the Lord, the further away I get from my husband." That pastor said, "I don't know who you are getting close to, but it's not the Lord, because the truth is: The closer we get to God, the more humble we become, the more broken before him, the more grateful, and the more relational."

Draw near to Christ, according to - not your own works, not your own rightness, not your own righteousness, not your own accomplishments - but according to the gospel. "God, I draw near to you because of what Jesus Christ has done for me. Lord, in my sin I seek you and receive forgiveness as a gift."

If you are here and you are not sure where you are with Jesus Christ, this is the whole ballgame. You and I have sinned against God and we have a problem with God. We have a broken relationship. And he is just. He will judge sin. He will not look at a few good things and say, "Those good things cancel out bad things." We wouldn't do that. We wouldn't say to someone who has murdered, "Well, it's okay, because you helped your elderly neighbor with her groceries." It's flawed logic that says, "I'm going to get to heaven and God is going to ignore my sin because I was a little bit better than this person, or because I tried to do some good things." We have a problem with God - a serious problem - and that problem with God explains why things are not the way they should be in the world, why there are shootings, why there is pain and suffering and evil. But there is good news: There is a solution in Jesus Christ. He paid the penalty of our sin. He took that judgment on himself. When the Christian understands that, there is a change that happens in the inner person. Yeah, we are growing, we've got a long way to go, but it changes the way we relate.

I will leave you with this thought, this application. Many times in my own walk with the Lord,

I have gotten up and my heart is not right. I am offended. I am tempted to be vindictive or resentful. And there, in moments of prayer and opening the bible, God will meet me and adjust my heart. He will begin to convict me of my attitude: that it's not right, that it's not appropriate in light of all that God has done for me and in me. #5 - draw near to Christ, according to the gospel.

6. Consider eternity. In the last part of verse 3 Paul says, "Hey, listen, we have all labored together, and I want my true companion to help these women. We have all labored, partnered in the gospel - Clement and the rest of my fellow workers." Look at how he describes the whole group in the last phrase, "...whose names are in the book of life." Now, that's a serious idea, isn't it? It's a sobering idea. There is a book, and when your name is written in that book, you have eternal life. And your name is written in that book according to your faith in Jesus Christ, according to God's salvation - Jesus' payment for your sin. Consider eternity.

Did your mom ever lock you in your room with the brother you couldn't get along with? Did your mom ever say, "Listen, I'm just putting the two of you in your room. Either you kill each other, but don't come out until you get along"? Maybe I'm alone. My mom did that to me all the time. Eternity is a long time, right? You are going to live with this person forever, so start getting along. I don't think that's Paul's point. I think he's got a much more significant, much deeper point to make here.

I think his point is this: Jesus loved this person enough to die for them. Their names are written in the book of life by the blood of Jesus. Do you not value this person? Do you so value your perspective, and being right, that that is more important to you than this other person? Pretty much, that's what's going on, and Paul is bringing a corrective to us. Eternity is at stake. Consider eternity. Last point...

7. Over-communicate affection. Over-communicate affection. Look at verse 1. Paul says, "Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my crown, my joy, stand firm in the Lord, my beloved." I mean, he just pours out love on these people. He says, "I love you. I long for you. My brothers. My beloved. My crown. My joy." What is that -- my joy and my crown? He is talking about something very specific. He is envisioning the moment at the end of time, when we all stand before Jesus Christ and he says, "You know what? You are my crown; you are my reward. My personal fulfillment, my experience of the joy of God will be so overwhelming when I stand with you before God and we say, 'We did it. We ran this race together. We fought the fight. We fought through our differences. We fought to love one

another that others might come to Christ.' You are my reward. I just want to tell you, 'I love you.' Can I just say this?"

Think about all your various relationships: parents, children, siblings, friends, brothers. Communicate your love for others. Do it verbally. Do it physically. Don't assume it. Don't neglect it. Love covers a multitude of sins. Paul models this for us so very well.

Friends, the last three points point to the reality that in Christ our conversations need to be different. Our relationships need to be different. We have an opportunity, because of the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, to experience deep, intimate, pure, and holy relationships.

Like many of you, I was disturbed by the recent news of the shooting in Roseburg, Oregon, at the community college there where 10 individuals lost their lives. There is something sad about the conversations that took place after that. President Obama talked about gun control in the aftermath of these shootings, and there were some local officials in Roseburg that accused President Obama of politicizing the moment. One local official said something to the effect that they were still counting the bodies, and he accused the president of promoting a political agenda, that it was insensitive, according to this official.

Ben Carson is running for president. He was asked, "If a gunman comes up to you and holds a gun on you and asks you your religion, would you say that you are a Christian? If you were asked, 'Are you a Christian?' what would you say?" That question was relevant. There is some argument about it, but evidently the shooter sought to identify Christians before shooting in the community college in Roseburg. Dr. Carson responded by saying, "Well, I wouldn't necessarily answer the question. I wouldn't just stand there. I would resist, and I would say to everyone in the room, 'Let's attack the gunman. He may shoot me, but he can't shoot all of us.'" Obviously, I am summarizing. That's not a direct quote. He was accused of being insensitive, that he was implying that the individuals who were in the community college didn't respond appropriately.

This kind of exchange is typical, and we see it played out in the media. What's interesting is that I didn't really hear either side addressing the issue very often. If you listen charitably, I think your response would be something like this. I think President Obama responded according to his conviction that he believes -- whether you agree or not, whether I agree or not -- he believes that curbing gun violence will happen as we exercise gun control. Now, you may or may not believe that. That's not really the point. The point is that we don't get to the point. We don't get to the issue. Dr. Carson, on the other hand, I think, answered the question according to his conviction that resisting gunmen and individuals with evil intent will lead us to curbing violence, curbing destruction.

I want to suggest to you that as Christians, that's where we need to go with the conversation. We need to thoughtfully, carefully, go to the issue. If you feel that an individual is genuinely being insensitive, maybe it's appropriate to comment on it. I'm just amazed at the level of personal attacks, the way motives are assumed and judged, and I am starting to get old enough where I'm thinking that this is worse than ever before. I mean, it's always bad, but can we not have genuine conversations about these very important issues?

There is scriptural instruction that helps us. Let me just share these two verses as we draw near our conclusion. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:29, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." Colossians 4:6: "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." I think in both references we are being encouraged to consider eternity, to consider that as important as gun control might be as an issue, as important as immigration might be as an issue, as important as -- you line up the issues -- we need to engage in meaningful conversations on those issues. As important as they are, we are really ultimately about eternity, and we want to speak words of gospel truth, words of grace. We want our faith in Christ to not only inform our conversations, but to very much flavor our tone as we interact.

The Colossians reference tells us that our speech is to be seasoned with salt. That's a curious reference. What does that mean? I think food without salt we find to be bland, and that the implications there are: think it through, be creative, be thoughtful, be kind, but have something to contribute to the conversation. Don't say foolish things that just insult other people on these very complicated and difficult issues. Do not be uncharitable and unkind in our exchange. I would say, even if you are with a group of like-minded people and they get carried away, there is a place for you to say, "Hey, let's be careful here."

In conclusion, I want you to go away from this message today thinking about your personal communication with your spouse, with your children, with your parents, with your brothers and sisters in church, if you're in church. Say, "Lord, help us to walk wisely, but also in love, according to the gospel of Jesus Christ." Amen?