

Handling Conflict God's Way, part 1 Ephesians 4:1-22

- I. Conflict; struggle, eruptions, feuds, quarrels, contentions and strife.
 - a. Jesus dealt with it repeatedly in his ministry – sometimes he was even the cause of it!
 - b. Paul had deal with conflict in the churches that he started.
 - i. Although they were people who had given their lives to the service of Christ.
 - ii. They were also human beings – sinful, selfish human beings.
 - c. Over and over again, Paul had to teach the churches under his care how to respond when conflict erupted in the community of faith.
 - i. In 1 Corinthians 1 – when the church is fighting over its leadership, Paul steps in to admonish them.
 - ii. In Colossians 3 – when conflict became bitter, Paul had to teach them how to forgive.
 - iii. In Galatians 5, using perhaps his strongest language – Paul says, “If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.” {verse 15}
- II. In Ephesians 4, Paul continues to teach the church about unity and maturity in the Body of Christ.
 - a. He spends the first half of the chapter urging the church to live up to the high standards that God has set.
 - i. “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” – Eph. 4:1.
 - b. He spends the second half of the chapter giving specific instruction for living in unity in Christ.
 - i. A life of ignorance, hardened hearts, and full of strife and greed.
 - ii. “That is not the way of life you learned,” Paul tells them. {Eph. 4:20}
 - c. Today, we turn our attention to Ephesians 4 to hear again Paul's teaching to the Church.
 - i. As we discover “God's Way of Handling Conflict in the Church.
 - ii. I say, “in the church.”
 1. That will be our focus. Not family, work, home.
 2. To do more would be to take on too much.
 3. Although I think we'll discover principles here that will transcend “church” and apply themselves to home, family, and work.
 - iii. I say, “God's way.”
 1. Not our way. Not the common sense way. Not the way the experts have designed – but God's way.
 2. We discover God's Way in his word – Ephesians 4.
- III. First, in the middle of conflict be completely humble and gentle.
 - a. Humility in the ancient Greek world was the same as lowly.
 - i. To be of humble birth or humble origins was to be looked down upon.
 - ii. To be humble was to be poor, ignorant and little value.
 - iii. In our own culture humble means self-effacing, and self-depreciating.
 - b. To be gentle was to be soft and weak.
 - c. Paul means something different – something which distinguishes Christian culture from Greek culture and in large measure from our own.

- i. When Paul speaks of humility he is not talking about taking a posture of devaluing ourselves or thinking less of ourselves.
 - 1. When Paul talks about humility he isn't advocating loving ourselves less.
 - 2. He means that we should love God more.
 - 3. Humility is seeing God for who God really is.
 - ii. Gentleness, for Paul, means to be disposed to forgiveness.
 - 1. To be inclined to punish moderately or lightly, even for great wrongs.
 - 2. It means acting without jealousy or spite.
 - d. So in Ephesians 4:2 when it says, "be completely humble and gentle," Paul is asking the Church to take up positions based upon a right understanding of God and a predisposition toward forgiveness and mercy.
 - e. For the church (for the Christian), humility and gentleness change how we approach conflict-laden situations and conflict with other people.
 - i. An attitude of humility demands that we consider God's purposes and God's will above our own.
 - ii. A posture of gentleness demands that forgiveness be our first priority and that jealousy and spite have no place.
 - iii. APP: What does this kind of gentleness and humility look like in the church?
 - 1. It would look like a body of believers who considered God's priorities and God's purposes before their own.
 - 2. It would mean that our first response would not be to justify ourselves, make ourselves look good, or prove ourselves right.
 - a. Our first response would be to offer forgiveness in the face of being wronged.
 - b. Our first responsibility would be to the unity of Christ's body (the church).
 - c. It wouldn't make you a doormat or a pushover, it would help you approach conflict with the mind of Christ.
 - d. In any conflict, it wouldn't matter which of us won or lost, only that Christ wins!
 - 3. An important word – remember that your humility and gentleness are not predicated on anyone else's response.
 - a. If you are humble and gentle and the other person is not – that is not license to abandon humility and go on the offensive.
 - b. God's commandments aren't conditional (if this happens, do this), they are unconditional (if this happens, you will still do this).
- IV. Paul goes on to say in verse 2 that we must be patient.
- a. Patience is "the ability to endure without complaining."
 - i. Patient people endure whether something is inconvenient or easy.
 - ii. Patient people endure whether something is difficult or simple.
 - b. Patience is surrendering our agenda to God.
 - i. That means that events and circumstances aren't upsetting; because we understand that God is sovereign and God is in control – so we are patient until such time as God's plans are revealed.
 - ii. It means that our timetable and our expectations (for ourselves, God and others) are set aside; because we understand that God will bring His will to pass in the fullness of time – so we are patient.

- c. Ephesians 4:2 again, “Be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love.
 - i. “Bearing with one another in love?” – That’s another way to say patience.
 - ii. Patience is an express of love; an expression of care and commitment.
- d. APP: What would it take for someone to describe our church as “patient” with each other?
 - i. Let me share with you a story from Brennan Manning’s book, “The Ragamuffin Gospel.”

The meeting opened with the Serenity prayer followed by a moment of silence. The prologue to Alcoholics Anonymous was read from the Big Book by Harry, followed by the Twelve Steps of the program from Michelle. That night, Jack was the appointed leader. “The theme I would like to talk about tonight is gratitude,” he began, “but if anyone wants to talk about something else, let’s hear it.” Immediately Phil’s hand shot up. “As you all know, last week I went up to Pennsylvania to visit family and missed the meeting. You also know I have been sober for seven years. Last Monday I got drunk and stayed drunk for five days.” The only sound in the room was the drip of Mr. Coffee in the corner. “You all know the buzz word, H.A.L.T., in this program,” he continued. “Don’t let yourself get hungry, angry, lonely or tired or you will be very vulnerable for the first drink. The last three got to me. I unplugged the jug and ...” Phil’s voice choked and he lowered his head. I glanced around the table – moist eyes, tears of compassion, soft sobbing the only sound in the room. “The same thing happened to me, Phil, but I stayed drunk for a year.” “Thank God you’re back.” “Boy, that took a lot of guts.” “Relapse spells relief, Phil,” said the counselor. “Let’s get together tomorrow and figure out what you needed relief from and why.” As the meeting ended, Phil stood up. He felt a hand on his shoulder, another on his face. “You old ragamuffin,” said Denise. “Let’s go. I’m treating you to a banana split at Tastee Freeze.”¹

- ii. APP: I wonder, how many churches would respond this way?
 - 1. Would they lift up and bear up their brother or their sister in a time of moral chaos?
 - 2. Or would they condemn, ostracize and showing a complete lack of patience, offer shame instead of grace?
 - 3. We’re not too good with patience – unless we want to give it to ourselves.
 - iii. In times of conflict we are especially prone to impatience.
 - 1. Few of us like conflict and we want it resolved as soon as possible.
 - 2. This makes us impatient just when forbearance is called for.
 - iv. When I think about it this way, patience feels like grace.
 - 1. Our God is the God of the next last chance.
 - 2. Our God gives us grace beyond measure.
 - 3. How much grace can we, do we give?
- V. Next, Paul instructs the Ephesian church to speak the truth in love.
- a. The two key elements of Paul’s instruction here are truth and love.
 - i. To speak truth is sometimes difficult in times of conflict.
 - 1. Yet Paul says that speaking the truth in love breeds maturity.
 - 2. It helps us to “grow up into Him who is the head, that is, Christ.” {Eph. 4:35}.
 - ii. How can we say the tough things that need to be said when we speak truth?

¹ Brennan Manning, **The Ragamuffin Gospel**, (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2005), pp. 67-68.

1. How can we discern the best time to say them?
 2. How can we speak truth, not as a weapon to tear down, but as a way to build up into maturity?
 - iii. Truth is balanced by love.
 1. To speak the truth in love means that we remove some things from your speech.
 2. Spite, jealousy, envy, anger – these cannot be part of speaking truth in love.
 - b. APP: Speaking the truth in love means truth untainted by anger, and jealousy.
 - i. That involves a measure of self-control that needs to be cultivated in our lives. It doesn't happen by accident.
 - ii. It's okay to be angry, but it's never okay to be hurtful.
 1. Truth is usually spoken at normal volume not a raised voice.
 2. Truth in love is coupled with humility and gentleness.
 3. Truth is discerning of opportune moments, and patiently waits for them to come.
 - iii. Speaking the truth in love also requires gentleness, where forgiveness is priority one – not vengeance, or punishment.
- VI. Finally, Paul tells the members of the church to put off your old self.
- a. Our answer to this question is a telling one, "How did you handle conflict before you came to Christ? Is there a difference between now and then?"
 - b. We said last week that the work God wants to do in our lives is transformation.
 - i. This is what Paul has in mind when he says, "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires." {Eph. 4:22}
 - ii. It's almost like changing your clothes. You take off one set and put on another.
 1. You can hear this idea echoed in Colossians 3:8-10.
 2. "But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."
 - c. Part of being made into a new Creature in Christ is a change in attitude and disposition.
 - i. How can you know if you've put off your old self?
 1. How much place do rage, malice, filthy language and gossip have in your life?
 2. The less of them, then the more you've put off your old self.
 - ii. This, like many things in our walk with Christ, is a process.
 1. God doesn't require instantaneous change.
 2. But, he does require progress.
- VII. Handling conflict God's way in the church means ...
- a. Being humble and gentle.
 - i. Being patient.
 - ii. Speaking the truth in love.
 - iii. Putting off your old self.
 - b. These things are attitude – they are mind set. They are intangible and hard to get a handle on.
 - i. But you know them when you see them.

- ii. And you know their absence when you see it.
 - c. To be a community marked by humility and gentleness; of great patience.
 - i. Capable of speaking the truth in love.
 - ii. Because they have been remade in the image of Christ – putting off the marks of their old self.
 - d. Paul has begun by showing us attitudes that we need in order to deal with conflict in the church.
 - e. Once we cultivate these attitudes, Paul will lead us to specific behaviors that we need in the face of conflict.
- VIII. Until then, our prayer is this: *“God, remake me into a new creature. Grant me humility, gentleness, and patience. Help me set aside the habits and practices of my old life and develop in me the mind of Christ.”*