

Growing Through Conflict

Preached at DCC on 5-3-2020

Text

2Cor. 7:1 Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

2Cor. 7:2 Open your hearts to us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have cheated no one. 3 I do not say this to condemn; for I have said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. 4 Great is my boldness of speech toward you, great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort. I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation.

2Cor. 7:5 For indeed, when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears. 6 Nevertheless God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, 7 and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was comforted in you, when he told us of your earnest desire, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more.

2Cor. 7:8 For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while. 9 Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. 10 For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. 11 For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter. 12 Therefore, although I wrote to you, I did not do it for the sake of him who had done the wrong, nor for the sake of him who suffered wrong, but that our care for you in the sight of God might appear to you.

Introduction

Well, you have probably noticed that I am not going to be preaching on the Gospel of Mark today. The reason for this is that the session asked me to end our sequestering with a little instruction on what we have learned about body life and how we can grow even more going forward.

It is no secret that there have been many different perspectives on the COVID-19 sequestration or even how serious the disease was. Some people are troubled by that. We elders are not as troubled by differences of viewpoint. In fact, different viewpoints are often fantastic opportunities for growth. Even genuine conflict can present opportunities to grow in God's grace, and if we are too conflict averse, we can lose those opportunities.

I think for the most part, our congregation has handled these stressful weeks admirably well. So this is a sermon that will in part appreciate what we have done well. But the elders have recognized that even we elders have not handles things perfectly. I've had confessing of my own sins and errors (and I do distinguish between sins and errors, and they can both be confessed and admitted). We elders are very willing to own our errors. In fact, Gary and I have routinely turned disagreements or potential disagreements into prayer. So you will

notice that each point of the outline is in the form of a prayer. And I hope that going through these principles today is a blessing to all of you.

Let me start by reading a comment from a conflict management book that implies that lack of disagreement and even lack of conflict may *at least sometimes* be a bad sign. This author said,

The comment that frightens me most as a consultant on conflict and cooperation is the declaration, "I've been at this church for more than twenty years and we never have conflict." It frightens me because my experience tells me that either this congregation has not done anything for twenty years, or it has failed to admit those instances where conflict has in fact existed.

Another author said,

Conflict occurs most often in congregations in which there is a deep commitment to the church. The more deeply ingrained is the sense of ownership about what is happening, the more possible the conflict. Apathy is a sure guarantee of a conflict-free setting. Persons who do not care about their faith are unlikely to exhibit enough energy to act upon it. Corpses do not fight!"

I especially appreciate that last phrase - "Corpses do not fight." And our church is philosophically committed to allowing members to be Bereans. Now, that author is not saying that we should *want* to have conflict (that's a bad sign), or that you are God's gift for bringing conflict (that too is a bad sign). He is just saying that apathy is not a good alternative. Listen to one more comment from the leader of a healthy growing church:

We have dynamic people, dynamic ministries, and programs which produce their share of conflict. We use the conflict to move each of us toward growth and the congregation toward even greater service.

Some of you have had more conflict within your families because you have been couped up together more. It has forced you to grow in areas that you might not otherwise have grown. Others have felt frustrated that there even was a sequestration. And we can appreciate that and respect it. The purpose of this sermon is not to settle differences of view. You can relax on that point. We trust the Holy Spirit in that department. The purpose of this sermon is to have you evaluate *how* you have handled differences of opinion and conflict. If we can learn from the stresses, conflicts, disappointments, and even the sins of these past few weeks, then everything we have gone through can glorify God. Paul had his share of conflict during his years of service, and I want to look at his seasoned instructions for how we can deal with differences that arise, whether they are serious or minor. I'm only going to deal with seven of his principles, and I have turned each principle into a prayer that I have made for myself.

Lord, would you show me if I have done anything wrong? (v. 1)

The first prayer that I have made is, "Lord, would you show me if I have done anything wrong, or (even if I am right) if I have needlessly contributed to the stress?" This is a prayer that can help to bring humility in the midst of disagreements. It's basically asking God if there is any sinful goal, motive, tactic, or attitude that is complicating the conflict. At least twice during the past several weeks I have caught myself responding to someone out of pride and had to confess that quickly. Getting rid of sin helps us to think more clearly,

relate more clearly, and argue more lovingly. You or I might be 100% right, but have wrong attitudes. We might be 90% right, but need to change even if that makes others conclude that we were 100% wrong. The important thing is to turn it into a prayer and make sure you are right before God however others might interpret your motives. This is not being a doormat or a rollover. In fact, it makes you a better warrior. This has to do with making sure that the Holy Spirit is delighted with not only the goals you are pursuing, but also the methods and the attitudes as well.

Paul starts off this chapter by saying, **“Therefore, having these promises, beloved, [and now notice that he includes himself] let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”** Paul is starting the discussion of his disagreements by saying, “Let’s do some self-examination and confess our sins before we even have the discussion.” What a wonderful way to start. This actually helped to settle a majority of the differences that I had with my father - so much so that I remember thinking one time, “Ah, that’s not fair” when my dad asked me to pray, because I knew that my thinking would instantly be adjusted when I started talking to God about the question.

Lord, help me to be open and transparent and to encourage others to be open and transparent (v. 2 - “Open your hearts to us” with 6:11; etc.)

The second principle is to be committed to openness and to call for openness. Using Whitney’s book on praying Scripture, I’ve turned it into a prayer for myself: “Lord, help me to be open and transparent and to encourage others to be open and transparent.” This is a very difficult prayer to sincerely make because pride gets in the way. We don’t want to be bullied or taken advantage of, right?

Let’s look at examples of both sides of this prayer. Verse 2 says, **“Open your hearts to us.”** He felt like he was being closed off and he tried to get communication open again. I appreciate the brothers who have been willing to come to Gary and me and explain their concerns about what we have done. I appreciate that. That is an implementation of this principle. May we always be an open and transparent congregation. It doesn’t mean that we will always come to agreement even after having discussed the issues, but the openness of heart goes a long way to avoiding misunderstandings. And it certainly shows that we love one another and are committed to each other.

You see, the first temptation when we have strong disagreements with each other is to avoid each other; to have barriers going up between us, and to only talk with those who agree with us. That can then cycle into worse habits of complaining, gossiping, backbiting, etc.

So Paul’s second principle is simple yet logical - if there is a problem, let’s talk about it. That’s makes sense, right? Let’s talk about it. Talk to the person who has the problem and see if you can sort it out. And by the way, it may not be a solvable problem. You can see several examples in the Scripture where both sides had legitimate points, but for one

reason or another they could not come to agreement. And so they had to agree to disagree agreeably and to keep loving each other. And when we get to the Gospel of Mark I might mention one such conflict.¹ In some churches that is actually frowned upon because disagreement is feared and conformity is valued.

Now, let's dig into this principle a little bit deeper because in this book of 2 Corinthians we can see that the hurts went both ways. We'll be seeing in a moment that Paul had brought pain into their lives, and this caused them to have some barriers toward him. But let's look first of all at how Paul handled their wrongful hurts toward him.

Paul had been hurt by this congregation over and over again. In chapter 10 he quotes the congregation as saying about him, "his bodily presence is weak, and his speech is contemptible." Wow! That's pretty bold. I would say it was sinfully bold. And it was definitely hurtful to Paul. In chapter 11 he was called inferior, and he was not paid a salary by them when he deserved it and said that he deserved it. In the same chapter they claimed falsely that he did not love them. The false apostles had convinced the people that Paul was a fool. If you read through the book you can see that Paul had been badly hurt - hurt to the core of his being. Concerning this conflict Paul said in verse 5, "Outside were conflicts, inside were fears." And the most natural thing for Paul to do would be to write them off and have nothing to do with them. "If you don't like my service, well, I'll just resign from the committee." But Paul indicates that that would not have been a godly attitude.

So rather than pushing such people off, Paul wanted to maintain open lines of communication. In the previous chapter (chapter 6:11) Paul said,

O Corinthians! We have spoken openly to you, our heart is wide open. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us.

This is the hardest step in managing conflict. Getting people, who have cut themselves off from each other, to be willing to be vulnerable and open again - husbands with wives; members with other members. And we are not talking about just being civil to each other. People who are alienated can still be civil and smile and be pleasant to each other. But genuine reconciliation requires that we be willing to have hearts opened. Notice I didn't say that we have to agree, or even that we have to keep discussing the past pains. There is unlikely to be 100% agreement between any two thinking people on earth. But *openness* is achievable by God's grace. But I will admit that having an open vulnerable heart is very hard to do.

So what does it mean to have an open heart? It involves at least these four things:

¹ You can think of the example of Mark (who had already written the Gospel of Mark by prophetic inspiration - so he was no slouch) being at the core of a disagreement with the apostle Paul (who had also written some Scriptures by prophetic inspiration - so he was no slouch). In the sermon on the Gospel of Mark we may see that the personal relationship part of this disagreement got solved earlier than some people think.

1. Acceptance of the person. Not necessarily acceptance of their viewpoint, but acceptance of the person.
2. Deeper communication with the person. And deeper communication doesn't mean that you keep opening up the subject of disagreement until someone caves in. That's not deeper communication. That's harassment, or at least nagging. Deeper communication recognizes that there are things we differ on and have hurt each other on, but we are still committed to the risk of open communication on all of life's issues and not just surface communication.
3. Third, it involves displayed love for that person. Just think of the languages of love and see if you have stopped engaging in them with that person. That's a sign that you still have a closed heart. The languages of love must be present. So acceptance of the person, deeper communication with the person, languages of love...
4. And fourth, a willingness to allow that person to disagree with us without feeling insulted. Acceptance does not mean you have to agree. You can accept a person and be committed to him without believing that he is right on the issue that had previously alienated you. It's a sign of maturity when you are able to graciously handle those kinds of disagreements.

Why are people reluctant to do that? Why had the Corinthians closed off their affections toward Paul? The reason is that the moment you open your heart to someone, you become vulnerable once again; you can get hurt all over again. You can avoid hurts by not getting married, not making friends, and being a hermit. Well, actually, hermits will testify that they have even more time on their hands to be hurt over and over again by thinking about the past hurts people have done against them against them. But the point is that the best things in life require that you take the risk of getting hurt from time to time. The truth hurt when Paul preached it, and these people didn't like that. I think our church has been successful in having these kinds of deep relationships. It's one of the things that made sequestration so painful. In hindsight, we should have regathered sooner or maybe even not had the sequestration. Someone recently convinced me of that. Hindsight is usually better than foresight.

Anyway, the various passages on openness in this book shows me that it is not enough for you to be right on an issue. Listen to this - it's not enough for you to be right on an issue. Paul was right, but because he knew the truth hurts, and hurts tend to make people clam up and to shut their hearts up, he pursued them with love. He didn't just hit them with truth; he pursued them with love. He did what he could to make open relationships. That should be the goal when resolving church conflicts. Not winning an argument, but bringing people to a place that they are even more open with each other, and even closer to each other than they were before the conflict.

Lord, cleanse me from the fear of man and from false humility if my criticism is correct. (v. 2 - “We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have defrauded no one.”)

Here is how I have turned verse 2 into a prayer: “Lord, cleanse me from the fear of man and from false humility if my criticism is correct.” Sometimes people are way too quick to back down or apologize because they are fearful of offending the other person. You may have been fearful of expressing your disagreements with the session for this very reason. But if you believe you are right in your disagreement with us or with anybody else, feel free to say that you believe that. We would much rather that there be open communication, than stuffing of emotions. Actually, most of you are pretty good at that and at least some of you could have a bit more humility in admitting you might theoretically be wrong on some blue moon Tuesday. Just saying. But let’s avoid false humility that makes us too quick to apologize even when we are right.

Where do I get that from the text? Well, in the second sentence in verse 2 Paul says, “**We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have defrauded no one.**” Was he being arrogant? No. This was an inspired statement, so it was the truth. And he told them the truth. He had examined himself and he believed that he was free of wrongdoing in this conflict. Now you might initially think you were not wrong and have nothing to apologize about and then later realize that you 100% right. That has on occasion been true of me. So there needs to be a balance there between the humility of self-examination and avoiding *false* humility. Now, he admits later that he had brought them pain. There was no question about that. But he wants them to realize that it was not because of his sin. The pain was the truth exposing their sin.

Now this gets to the flip side of verse 1. To avoid Pharisaism, we’ve already seen that we must be open and honest about our sinfulness. But the opposite extreme must be avoided too. We ought not to solve conflict by admitting fault when we are not at fault (or at least we have not yet been convinced that we are at fault). That is a form of lying to maintain peace. And we ought not to downplay the other person’s sin. G. K. Chesterton wrote about a man who “was so anxious to forgive that he denied the need of forgiveness.” Do you understand what he was saying? When people would sin against him, he would downplay the seriousness of what they had done because he didn’t want to make them feel bad; he didn’t want to ruffle feathers. That’s a false humility.

Unfortunately, this is the only way some people know how to resolve a fight, is by admitting that they were partly to blame - even when that’s not true. That doesn’t solve the issues. In fact, it reinforces the sinner in his rebellion and pride. I have known people that you couldn’t drag with a mule to make a confession of guilt until the other party accepted some blame. And then they would brush it off as an example where all of us are sinners and make mistakes. If you are one of those people who is so proud that you will not humble yourself by confession unless you can also throw a stone, then you need to repent of that. Such attitudes make genuine conflict resolution impossible. On the other hand, if you are always making peace by admitting blame when there really is no fault on your part, you are an enabler of that person’s prideful ways. Can you see why I say that it requires God’s grace

on a moment by moment basis to walk this balance in conflict resolution. Maybe you are married and divorce is not an option so you with false humility take the blame yourself and you repeatedly do that. That too needs to be repented of.

Lord, help me to maintain a positive attitude (vs. 3-4,7,9,12-16) in the following four ways:

Lord, help me to not condemn this person. (v. 3 - "I do not say this to condemn you")

A fourth principle that is absolutely critical is the need to always communicate a positive attitude. And I've broken that prayer down into four parts. Proverbs says that a harsh answer stirs up strife. You might be in the right again, but when you use harshness, it is just going to intensify the conflict; it's going to make things worse. Again, being right in a conflict does not guarantee that you have God's blessing or that what you are doing will benefit the other person.

So there are four ways in which Paul showed a positive attitude. First of all, he says in verse 3, "**I do not say this to condemn.**" So, turning that into a prayer, I pray, "Lord, I don't want to condemn anyone." Paul's goal was not to hurt them; not to get even; not to mash them into the ground with the truth.

And people think, "But I'm just sharing the truth." OK, let's examine that. In chapter 3 Paul contrasted a ministry of condemnation with a ministry of life. And here is the interesting thing about those two ministries: they were both on the right side of the conflict because they both have the law of God to back them up. Both ministries use the law or the truth. But the ministry of condemnation was only concerned about the integrity of the law or the truth and does not care about the person adequately. In contrast, the ministry of the Spirit is concerned about the whole person. The Spirit of God gave the law, but He gave it out of a desire to give life through grace. So Paul said, "**the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.**" Paul didn't just use the law to bring conviction and to prove that he was right. You know? We can use the Word like a club. Paul was interested in more than just winning an argument. Paul wanted to win the person. Paul was opening the wound (and it always hurts to open a wound), but he was opening the wound so that he could pour in the medicine of grace. The ministry of the law opens the wound; that's all it does. The ministry of the Spirit opens the wound for the purpose of pouring in grace. So he assures them. "I'm not writing this because I'm against you. I'm here because I'm on your side." Don't have a ministry of condemnation.

Lord, enable me to demonstrate by my words and actions that I am for them. (vv. 3-4 - “I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you” [NIV])

What’s another way to be positive? Well, the next phrase continues this positive attitude by expressing confidence in the relationship. In verses 3-4 Paul says,

For I have said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. Great is my boldness of speech toward you, great is my boasting on your behalf.

Here is how the NIV renders verse 4: “I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you.” It’s basically letting people know that you believe in them. The way I have turned this into a prayer is to say, “Lord, enable me to demonstrate by my words and actions that I am for them.” This is especially important when there is disagreement between husband and wife or between members, or even between an officer and member. Paul would not give up on the Corinthians. He had confidence in them because 1) they were Christians, 2) they were loved by God, 3) indwelt by the Spirit, 4) set apart to be conformed to Christ, 5) and because of God’s promise to finish the good work that he has begun. I mean, what greater confidence could we have? If God is for them, who are we to be against them? You can be for a person and still disagree, but sadly, disagreements often lead us to diminish our desire to be for them. That’s where sin creeps in even when we are right on the issue.

Now when you are armed with the confidence of what God’s grace can achieve in all of our brothers and sisters, you will begin depending upon God rather than acting like it all up to you to convince them. In fact, if you think it is up to you to change people’s minds and hearts, then you are going to be tempted to anger and frustration when people don’t change. You are especially going to be frustrated if someone is a rock-head, right? I think most of us at one point or another have tried to change people’s hearts, and it doesn’t work too well. We are simply stewards of the Word of God (as Gary preached last week) and it’s God’s Word that has the power to change people. We can relax in God’s timing and sovereignty on such change.

So we need confidence as an expression of our faith in God. But we need this confidence in the relationship as an expression to the other person *that they can be secure in the relationship of love even though we think they are wrong*. Does that make sense?

That’s a hard one! But we need to project that confidence that the other person is secure in our relationship of love even though we know (or think we know) they are wrong. One man who is involved in the Christian Conciliation Service of Los Angeles said, “We must have irrational confidence.” Even though I don’t like his use of the word “irrational,” because there is nothing irrational about God’s Word, I would say that it sometimes *appears* to be irrational because it isn’t dependent upon the facts down here below. Unbelievers will look on and wonder, “How come you guys are still friends, and love to hang out together? I would have written off that person long ago.” And you can reply, “How can I not love a fellow-sinner who is loved by Christ?” So express confidence in the relationship.

Lord, help me to have joy and confidence that Your way does work. (v. 4 - I am filled with comfort, I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation.)

The third way we can show a positive attitude is to express faith in the Biblical process. I turned verse 4 into this prayer: "Lord, help me to have joy and confidence that Your way does work." Paul said in verse 4 "**I am filled with comfort, I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation.**" The mention of "comfort" shows that there is pain, but because he has turned the whole conflict Godward, he was able to be positive. "**I am filled with comfort, I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation.**" It was not the *situation* which gave him comfort or joy, but the *process* that God had put in place and the realization that God is the person-changer, not Paul. God said that His way of doing things was capable of tearing down strongholds and taking every thought captive. We don't cynically use the means of conciliation that God has given and expect lousy results. We must believe that God's way works. We trust Him.

Lord, help me not to be so wrapped up in the pain of the past (verse 5) that I am blind to the beautiful things You are doing in the present and future (vv. 6-16).

The fourth way that Paul maintained a positive attitude can be seen in verses 5-16 where he acknowledges the pain of the past in verse 5, but is not bound by the past, is not harping on the past, and isn't chained to the past, and isn't constantly projecting pain from the past. I've turned that into a prayer, "Lord, help me not to be so wrapped up in the pain of the past (verse 5) that I am blind to the beautiful things you are doing in the present and future (vv. 6-16)." Many times there is nothing that can be done to change the past and it won't help the conflict at all to harp and harp about the past. Harping on the past, bringing up the past and constantly resentful about the past is a sure way to spoil any attempts at bringing reconciliation. Forget about the past, begin working on the present, and have hope for the future. And so these are some of the different ways that Paul maintained a positive attitude.

Lord, help me to be totally committed to this person in life and death. (v. 3 - "you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together")

Point V highlights the fact that it takes effort to promote this kind of unity. And Paul was so committed to unity that he was willing to live or die for the Corinthians. That shows sacrifice. Be committed to radical unity and appeal for radical unity. When you see unity start to break apart, address it. Put out the fires. Be the peacemaker. Look at verse 3. Paul said, "**you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together**" If people are convinced that you are committed to them in the Lord, it makes all the difference in the world. In fact, our membership covenant commits us to the one another passages doesn't it? Let me read some of those passages that each of us committed ourselves to:

1. "be at peace with one another" (Mark 9:50)
2. "love one another" (John 13:24-25)
3. "be devoted to one another" (Rom. 12:10)
4. "honor one another above yourselves" (Rom. 12:10)
5. "live in harmony with one another ... be willing to associate" (Rom. 12:16)
6. "stop passing judgment on one another" (Rom. 14:13)
7. "building up one another" (Rom. 14:19)
8. "Accept one another" (Rom. 15:7)
9. "admonish one another" (Rom. 15:14)
10. "serve one another" (Gal. 5:13)
11. "show forbearance to one another" (Eph. 4:1-2)
12. "speak truth [as] ... members of one another" (Eph. 4:25)
13. "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other" (Eph. 4:32)
14. "be subject to one another" (Eph. 5:21)
15. "do not lie to one another" (Col. 3:9)
16. "bear with one another" (Col. 3:13)
17. "spur one another on to love... and good deeds" Heb. 10:24-25 NIV)
18. "do not complain against one another" (James 5:9)
19. "confess your sins to one another" (James 5:16)
20. "pray for one another" (James 5:16)
21. "fervently love one another" (1 Pet. 1:22)
22. "Offer hospitality to one another" (1 Pet. 4:9 NIV)
23. "serving one another" (1 Pet. 4:10)
24. "humility toward one another" (1 Pet. 5:5)

If you recognized any sin in your life as I read through those commitments, confess them to the Lord and to each other before partaking of the Lord's Table. We want to eat unto blessing, not unto judgment. You can even do it during the singing of the hymn of response.

Paul said, "**You are in our hearts, to die together and to live together.**" And that is exactly the attitude that 1 John 3:16 commands us to have. It says, "**By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.**" When you have that kind of radical commitment to each other you are less likely to leave in a huff of anger. Occasionally wives and husbands have been tempted to do exactly that with each other – but then they remember that they can't. They are committed. And we need to have that commitment. That commitment shores us up when we are tempted to bail. 1 John 3:16 and this passage call us to be willing to live and die together. That realization hugely impacts how we handle conflict.

Lord, give me wisdom to know which option I should follow:

Principle VI is that we shouldn't forget that there are several options for conflict resolution between believers. And you can pray that God would give you wisdom on which option to

follow. The Slippery Slope chart I took from Peacemakers is on the bottom of your page and gives some options I haven't listed. We shouldn't assume that discipline is the immediate response we should have when we are wronged. In too many churches, that is their first go-to. They are way too litigious. That should be the last option.

Do I give in? (1 Cor. 6:7)

I've picked out some sample options. The first one is to simply give in. And some might think, "No way! I can't give in if I'm right, can I? That would be a violation of truth!" No, it need not be. 1 Corinthians 6:7 is an example of giving in even though you are right. Paul made it clear that giving in is always better than going to a pagan court with a brother. He made it clear that both parties have lost when they go to court. There is an emotional loss, an economic loss, a loss of reputation, a loss of ministry, and a loss of friendship. When you take a brother to court Paul says, "**it is already an utter failure for you.**" Now that's pretty strong words – to be an utter failure. Taking a fellow believer to court is not an option. Instead Paul called believers to one of five alternatives to going to court.

And giving in was one of those options. Paul said, "**Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be defrauded?**" That's astounding! Our warrior type personalities have a hard time doing that, right? Paul is recommending, "Given the alternatives before you, it's better to just lose the money and move on." There are times where the unreasonableness of the other party makes it impossible to truly resolve conflicts, and you end up giving in. I'm not saying you must do that. It's just one of several options the Bible lays out. Obviously you could pursue it to church court and get justice. But you don't have to. And if you are never willing to give in, it's not a good sign. Scripture gives this kind of peacemaking as an option if by God's grace you can keep from getting bitter. Abraham walked away from conflict several times on the issue of the wells. He did it as a peacemaker. It wasn't worth fighting. Because he wanted to maintain the friendship, he just gave in.

Husbands and wives sometimes do that for each other. It's not an unbiblical option, so long as we are not violating one of the earlier principles - such as not being an enabler. And some people buck at that. Their attitude is, "Unless I agree, I can't submit." But as any wife knows, true submission actually is tested by whether we will submit when we disagree. There are many wives who disagree with their husbands, but they sweetly submit because it doesn't involve them in sin. Disagreement can be a true test of submission. I can be a true test of many things, but it can be a true test of submission. Husbands will sometimes give in on a policy because of love, not submission. They gladly sacrifice on that particular disagreement because it doesn't involve them in sin. It's not their preference, but they love their wives. We recognize that some of you have done that on the health protocols. And we respect that. You don't have to agree with us for us to respect you and appreciate the sacrifice you are making. OK, enough on that.

Negotiation (Matt. 18:15)

Another method Paul allowed was negotiation. This is the first step of Matthew 18 where you go and reason with the person yourself.

Mediation (Matthew 18:16)

A third process allowed by the Bible is mediation. This is actually the second step of Matthew 18 where outsiders are brought in, not only as witnesses, but also as help for restoring a person - trying to mediate the problem. Sometimes that doesn't work, and you just drop it. Sometimes you go to the next step:

Binding arbitration (1 Cor. 6:4-5)

The fourth option is arbitration. The difference between mediation and arbitration is that in mediation a third party facilitates a resolution, whereas in arbitration a third party is given the right to make a decision. We call it binding arbitration because both parties agree beforehand to drop the matter completely, even if they feel the decision was unjust, once this wise person has made his decision. It's one way of moving on.

If people don't want the hassle of that, Proverbs 18:18 suggests tossing a lot. It would be equivalent to tossing a coin and letting God give binding arbitration. You don't have to believe that the coin toss is settling who is right. You are just saying, "We've got to move on." It's legitimate.

Church court (Matt. 18:16-20)

Taking it to church court is a form of arbitration, but it really is distinct because frequently one of the parties is hostile and will not submit even to a church court and may end up excommunicated. But that's not always the case. Some people are willing to let the church court judge and settle it and have promised to abide by that result.

So there are various choices that Paul gives for facing conflicts. And we need to make sure that we understand that we are not boxed into a confrontational method. Scripture does give leeway.

Seek To Win People, Not Arguments (vs. 7-16)

The last principle I want to address is that Paul sought to win people, not arguments. I've turned it into the prayer, "Lord, help me to win this person, not just win the argument." This was implied all the way through this sermon. In fact, instead of being a seventh point, this is the common thread of the sermon. But I do want to end by highlighting the ways that Paul won people.

Even When Issues Are Serious, Communicate Affection & Caring (v. 12,15)

First, he always communicated affection and caring for those he differed with. He starts this chapter by calling them beloved. That's another way of saying, 'Hey, I love you.' He said that his heart was wide open for them. He told them that he was united to them in life and in death. In verse 12 he says "that our care for you in the sight of God might appear to you."

Over and over Paul reminded them that he loved them and cared for them. We would do well to do the same. During times of conflict people might begin to think that we don't care for them because we disagree with them. Constantly communicate this affection while you are doing your disagreeing. And some of you are masters at this.

Seek To Bring Some Satisfaction To All Parties (vs. 7-16)

A second way he sought to win people rather than arguments was that he didn't take sides with people; he took sides on issues. And there is a big difference. And I think most in this congregation do a good job in this. Paul wanted the best for all the parties. For example, in verse 12 he says, "Therefore, although I wrote to you, I did not do it for the sake of him who had done the wrong, nor for the sake of him who suffered wrong, but that our care for you in the sight of God might appear to you." He said, "I didn't get involved because I like one person and didn't like another person." He genuinely showed concern and caring for those on all sides of the issue. He was fair to both sides. When you have this kind of attitude, you can work out Biblical compromises many times.

You Can Tell Your Success By How Close People Are To You After The Conflict (v. 7,13-16)

The last sub-point was that Paul ended up closer to the Corinthians as a result of the conflict. And this is what we should all desire. The conflicts that have happened over the past weeks have done the opposite of what Satan desired. We have pursued you, you've pursued us, and you've pursued each other. And that's the way it should be. I think these past weeks have been a good practice ground for how we should handle even tougher things in the future. So I am encouraged.

Verse 7 says, "and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was comforted in you, when he told us of your earnest desire, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more." They all grew through this time of conflict. Verse 15 says of Titus, "his affections are greater for you." Titus actually cared more for them now than he had before. "His affections are greater for you."

One of the ways that you can tell if you have handled conflict in a Biblical way or not is the long term results. Are you closer to the people, or is there a lingering distance and alienation? Like the prodigal son, is that person made to feel fully welcomed back, or is he in the dog house? With some people, you are in the dog house after a conflict whether you have won or lost. But for Christians that is never an option. We are called by God to win people, not simply to win conflicts.

You can see that we have covered a huge amount of territory. And let me tell you that it takes a huge amount of grace to live these principles out. When conflicts come up in the family, let it drive you to prayer. You'll need God's grace. I would encourage you to save the outline. It's hard not to blow it on one or another of those steps, but the more we practice, the better off we will be. We elders want to own our mistakes and our sins and we want to be closer to you as a result of our experiences. It is my prayer that our church would become more and more consistent with God's word in this important area of living. If you

want to study out this issue more you can read Ken Sandy's book, The Peacemaker. I got some of the points for this sermon from him. But that book has a lot of great material for further study and I recommend you read it. Again, thank you for your patience with the elders, and we elders can honestly say that we have a deep love for each you. May that continue to grow in Christ. Amen.