

RESOLVING CONFLICTS GOD'S WAY**2 CORINTHIANS 1:12-2:13, 12:11-21**

A Danish health survey asked almost 10,000 people between ages 36 and 52 this question: "In your everyday life, do you experience conflicts with any of the following people—your partner, children, other family members, friends, or neighbors?" Eleven years later, 422 of those people who'd been surveyed were no longer alive. That's a typical number. What was compelling, the researchers noted, is that the people who answered the question "always" or "often" were two to three times more likely to be among the dead. And the deaths were from the usual causes: cancer, heart disease, alcohol-related liver disease, etc.— not murder. The researchers concluded, "Stressful social relations[hips] are associated with increased mortality risk among middle-aged men and women." That's why they recommended that we develop what they called "skills in handling worries and demands from close social relations[hips] as well as conflict management." But in case you think that all conflict is bad, people in the survey who said they never experienced conflict had a slightly higher mortality rate than those who seldom did. In other words, perhaps a little conflict is good for your health.

Conflict. How many of you enjoy it? How many of you would prefer to avoid it if at all possible? We've begun a new message series on 2 Corinthians and I'm calling it "Cruciform: Living a Cross-Shaped Life." That's what the word "cruciform" means – something built or designed in the shape of a cross. It can be a building, a work of art, or a piece of jewelry. But it can also be a life. When your life or mine is cruciform, it's another way of saying other people can see in us a resemblance to and a reflection of Jesus. When your life – your actions, your attitudes, your words, how you treat other people – are Christlike, they're cross-shaped or cruciform.

There are two, indisputable facts about Paul and the Christians who lived in the Greek city of Corinth. First, they had significant and painful conflicts. Two, even though it was 2,000 years ago, we can still learn a great deal about how to handle and resolve conflicts in a godly way by observing how Paul dealt with them. When we read his letters to churches in the NT, it's like listening in on a telephone conversation. You can get a pretty good idea of what the person you can't hear is saying by what the person says who you can hear. That's what we're dealing with when we read 2 Corinthians. We're hearing one side of a conversation and we can make some reasonable assumptions about what was going on with the Corinthians. Now, first, I want to identify at least five significant conflicts the Corinthians had with Paul. Then, I want us to read two passages in 2 Corinthians that deal with those conflicts. You will better understand why Paul wrote what he wrote to the Corinthians when you're already aware of the conflicts he was having with them. Finally, I want us to think about what we can learn from Paul's example. If anyone lived out a cross-shaped – a cruciform – life, it was this great and godly leader, Paul. How he dealt with some pretty ugly, painful conflicts is a great example to us about how to resolve our conflicts with others in a godly way. First,

WHAT WERE THE SIGNIFICANT CONFLICTS BETWEEN PAUL AND THE CORINTHIANS?

Here was conflict #1: Paul had been personally attacked by someone at the church. As we read between the lines of Paul's letter, it's apparent an influential member of the Corinthian church had opposed or attacked Paul verbally in a very open, and public way when Paul had returned to Corinth for a visit. We don't know what prompted this attack or what was said by this man. Here's my guess. In 1 Corinthians we learn a member of the church was openly sleeping with his stepmother. Paul was aghast at this blatant immorality and also because the other members of the church just ignored and tolerated it. Paul said the man should be expelled from the church. I suspect this man – likely very influential, perhaps wealthy - did not like Paul's recommendation. So, when Paul returned to Corinth for a visit after he had written 1 Corinthians, this man decided to confront Paul right in front of everyone at the church. It also appears the members of the Corinthian church hadn't rushed to Paul's defense when this attack occurred. Maybe they just didn't know what to do. Regardless, they just kind of ignored or tolerated it which they were very good at doing about most things!

Paul – the founder and father of this congregation – was publicly humiliated. The Corinthians believers were Paul's spiritual children. Imagine being at some very public event with your adult children and someone decided to attack you verbally in front of everyone in a most vicious, embarrassing, and ugly way. Then, imagine your adult kids doing nothing to defend or protect you. They just kind of shrugged it off. Rather than getting into a verbal fistfight with this man there and then, Paul withdrew. He left town and returned to Ephesus. Later on, he decided to write a very pointed and strong letter of rebuke to the church at Corinth. He demanded they take action against the man who had attacked him. That letter was written sometime between 1 and 2 Corinthians, but we don't have a copy of it in the NT. It had been a very hard letter for Paul to write because he knew they would be embarrassed and ashamed of how they had failed him. Nevertheless, Paul realized if he and they were ever going to have a restored relationship, such a letter from him followed by appropriate action by them was absolutely necessary. The issue had to be dealt with rightly. Apparently, in response to Paul's letter rebuking them, the Corinthians took Paul's advice and disciplined this man.

This all led to conflict #2. That happens a lot, doesn't it? There was confusion over Paul's changed travel plans. The ugly incident in Corinth caused Paul to make some kind of change in when he planned to visit Corinth next. He knew his letter of rebuke hadn't won over the entire congregation. He still had enemies in the church. The relationship between him and some of the Corinthians was now so rocky that he was accused of being fickle, indecisive, and insincere. Just because he had changed his travel plans? Yes! It might sound absurd to us, but the changes in Paul's travel schedule became evidence to his enemies that he was somehow wishy-washy and manipulative. After all, God didn't change His mind and so-called apostles like Paul shouldn't either. That was their thinking! Paul had to explain he changed his travel plans to let tensions cool down between them.

Conflict #3: There was a group of "super apostles" who rejected Paul. The primary way the Christian faith spread in the 1st century was through men like Paul who traveled from city to city evangelizing and organizing new Christians into churches. But all these men

didn't necessarily like, respect, or work well with each other. After Paul got the church in Corinth started and then left to start other churches, another group of so-called Christian leaders came to town. They started to attack Paul's reputation and even his doctrine. They believed you still had to keep the OT Law and all the Jewish rituals and practices in order to be a real Christian. They were very skeptical of Paul's idea that people could only be made right before God by grace through faith. Just too easy! No way. You still had to earn your salvation by becoming Jewish and being a good person. This group of "super apostles" found allies there in Corinth and together they did their best to discredit Paul, question whether he was really an apostle, and claim they were far superior to him in every way. They had letters of recommendation from the leaders of the mother church of Christianity located in Jerusalem. Their ministry included signs, wonders, and miracles. They spoke, looked, and acted like real apostles should – unlike Paul who lacked personal charisma. Paul argued the Corinthians didn't need a letter of recommendation about him. They had come to faith in Jesus through his ministry. They were his living letter of recommendation themselves! His ministry also featured the miraculous, but if it also featured what looked like weakness precisely so God's power could be seen in and through it.

Conflict #4. We're not done yet? Oh, no. Paul refused to accept financial support from the Corinthians. It was commonplace and expected back in the first century for traveling evangelists and leaders to receive financial support from the churches they started or provided ministry to in some way. Paul received financial support from other churches he started, but for unknown reasons, he refused any personal financial support from the Corinthians. He used the argument that parents usually aren't supported financially by their kids. Because he was their spiritual father, he was not going to ask them for financial support. Well, this provided yet another reason for his critics to gang up on him. Apparently, some of his enemies claimed Paul was really a con man. They suggested that, yes, he worked with his hands as a tentmaker and refused their financial support in order to make them think he was a man of integrity. But he was probably secretly lining his pockets from the big special offering he was collecting for the poor Christians living in Jerusalem. Paul had to defend his integrity.

That brings us to conflict #5 which was really the most significant one of all. You can see it all through both 1 and 2 Corinthians. There were doubts about Paul's sufficiency as an apostle. He just didn't seem qualified. Paul just didn't match up well with all the cultural expectations of what a great, important person and leader should act or look like. You were supposed to look good, speak well, and have an authoritative personality. You were supposed to be above any manual labor like making tents and command financial support from your supporters. Paul's ministry style, his many ups and downs, his numerous troubles, his seeming defeats, and his physical weakness were troubling, to say the least. Paul wasn't victorious enough, triumphant enough, or on top of the world enough. To his critics there in Corinth, Paul just wasn't enough! He was lacking. He was insufficient. If Paul wanted to argue having a cross-shaped life and ministry was proof of his authenticity, most people in the 1st century – Christian or non-Christian - would have assumed exactly the opposite. To their minds that was evidence God didn't like you very much and you were not enjoying His favor.

Now, with that information in hand, let's read two passages in 2 Corinthians that assume and deal with those five conflicts. I believe we'll understand better what Paul wrote and why he wrote it. So, what can we take away from those Scriptures about resolving our conflicts today in God's way?

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM PAUL'S CONFLICTS WITH THE CORINTHIANS?

Let's start off with something obvious, but easily forgotten. Being a godly person doesn't prevent all conflict. Yes, it certainly can prevent conflict that's the result of our own sinful actions or attitudes, but not all conflict. Jesus is the best example of this obvious fact, right? Jesus was God in human flesh, but you remember how the Jewish religious leaders – a group who should have accepted, loved, and honored Him - hated Him so deeply they plotted to kill Him. That was some very serious conflict. Because Paul's life was cruciform, we shouldn't be surprised to see Him struggle with serious conflict, too. It's not that he looked for or invited conflict, but neither did he avoid or run from it. If you're a godly person, conflict will find you before you go looking for it! I hope you observed in these passages we read how careful and thoughtful Paul was in addressing each conflict. He went to great lengths to explain his motives. He revealed where and why he was offended. If necessary, he strongly rebuked. He did his best to demonstrate he was working in their best interests.

Paul displayed loads of relational wisdom in what we read today. Dr. Paul and Edith Rees were in their 90s when he was asked if they fought after 60-plus years of marriage. "O, sure we do," Dr. Rees responded. "Yesterday morning was a case in point. Edith and I were in our car, and she was driving. She failed to stop at a stop sign, and it scared me half to death. Well, I've loved Edith for all these years, and I have learned how to say hard things to her. But I must be careful because when Edith was a little girl, her father always spoke to her harshly. And today when she hears a manly voice speak in anger—even my voice—she is deeply, deeply hurt." Someone asked Dr. Rees, "Edith is 90-years-old. Are you telling me that she remembers a harsh voice that many years ago?" "She remembers that voice more than ever," Rees said. MacDonald asked, "So how do you handle that driving situation from the other day?" "I simply said, 'Edith, darling, after we've had our nap this afternoon, I want to discuss a thought I have for you. And when the nap was over I did. I was calm; she was ready to listen, and we solved our little problem.'" That's what I mean by relational wisdom.

Paul didn't just throw up his hands in disgust and say, "Forget those worthless Corinthians! They're all just a bunch of ungrateful, spiritually immature dopes!" Why didn't Paul just give up on them? Because people matter. Relationships matter. Jesus died for sinful human beings. We don't just write each other off in the Kingdom of God because we have conflicts. Here's one of Paul's wisest comments, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Rom. 12:18 NIV) Make sure you're not the problem when there's conflict. Make it your goal to have peaceful relationships with everyone. But also realize that some people are bound and determined to be at war with you regardless of how godly and peaceable you happen to

me. It happened to Jesus. It happened to Paul. It happens to godly people. It's actually part of a cross-shaped life.

Here's something else we can learn. Always practice integrity in my words and actions. Paul's integrity was openly questioned in regard to his travel plans that got changed and also in his refusal of financial support. Lack of integrity in our words or actions is always going to make any conflict worse. It probably should! On the one hand, keeping our integrity intact isn't going to prevent every conflict, but, on the other hand, it can go a long way to diffusing most conflicts and getting to peace more quickly. Notice how Paul pointed to his integrity. "We can say with confidence and a clear conscience that we have lived with a God-given holiness and sincerity in all our dealings.... That is how we have conducted ourselves before the world, and especially toward you. Our letters have been straightforward, and there is nothing written between the lines and nothing you can't understand." (2 Cor. 1:12-13 NLT) Paul was the kind of person who meant what he said because he was incapable of saying what he did not mean. Paul rejected the charge he was the kind of person who said "yes" when he meant "no" and vice-versa. God wasn't like that. The Bible says, "God is not a man, so he does not lie. He is not human, so he does not change his mind. Has he ever spoken and failed to act? Has he ever promised and not carried it through?" (Num. 23:19 NLT) Jesus was full of integrity. Therefore, Paul was, too. When you embrace Jesus as your Lord, you embrace integrity and telling the truth. Your word truly is your bond.

In chapter twelve, some in Corinth alleged Paul of being financially unethical. They insinuated he refused their financial support, but he was secretly pilfering funds out of the big offering he was collecting for poor believers in Jerusalem. Paul challenged the Corinthians to put up or shut up. "Some of you admit I was not a burden to you. But others still think I was sneaky and took advantage of you by trickery. But how? Did any of the men I sent to you take advantage of you? When I urged Titus to visit you and sent our other brother with him, did Titus take advantage of you? No! Perhaps you think we're saying these things just to defend ourselves. No, we tell you this as Christ's servants, and with God as our witness. Everything we do, dear friends, is to strengthen you." (2 Cor. 12:16-19 NLT) Having integrity is not going to resolve every conflict, but it's just harder to argue with basic decency and goodness. If your life is cruciform – if it's cross-shaped – you're going to be a reliable, consistent, faithful, and honest person.

Maybe the next lesson we can learn from Paul's experience with conflict is the most important one. Always be ready to forgive. Paul had been deeply hurt and offended by the man who had attacked him verbally as well as the Corinthians inadequate response to his humiliation. But once they took action and the man apparently repented, Paul refused to hold a grudge. "I am not overstating it when I say that the man who caused all the trouble hurt all of you more than he hurt me.... Now, however, it is time to forgive and comfort him. Otherwise he may be overcome by discouragement. So I urge you now to reaffirm your love for him.... When you forgive this man, I forgive him, too." (2 Cor. 2:5-10 NLT) This was exactly the opposite attitude of the Greco-Roman culture of the 1st century which was all about completely demolishing your enemies and rubbing their faces in their failures. It was similar to our cancel culture today. Do your best to

publicly humiliate people when they make a mistake. Make their lives miserable in whatever way possible. Scorn any and every expression of remorse or repentance as insincere and insufficient. Instead, Paul lived out what Jesus said. “If another believer sins, rebuke that person; then if there is repentance, forgive. Even if that person wrongs you seven times a day and each time turns again and asks forgiveness, you must forgive.” (Lk. 17:3-4 NLT)

Why was Paul so willing to forgive? Because the spiritual welfare of this man who attacked him and the church members there at Corinth were more important than his own injured feelings. Listen to what he wrote here, “Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.” (2 Cor 2:10-11 NLT) Paul knew Satan’s goal is always to destroy God’s work of reconciliation. He doesn’t want us to have peace between ourselves and God. Neither does he want us to have peace between ourselves and others. Satan is always and forever about getting us to hold a grudge, to justify our resentment, to cut off communication, and to withhold relationship with others. Paul knew that our unwillingness to forgive people who injure us can actually push them further away from the Lord. He also knew that a church that refuses to forgive and restore people who repent of their sins has lost the spirit of Jesus.

Here’s something I have observed as both a pastor and a follower of Jesus. One mark of an authentic follower of Jesus is the Holy Spirit-given ability to forgive. Forgiveness is very hard especially when it comes to very serious offenses against you. C.S. Lewis made this insightful comment, “We all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it.” It’s almost impossible to forgive some offenses without the help of the Holy Spirit living within us. That’s why non-Christians find it virtually impossible to forgive people who injure them. They don’t have the Holy Spirit enabling them to do it. An unwillingness to forgive others, Christian, will clog up the grace of Jesus in your life quicker than anything else I know of. If you’re unwilling to forgive, you need to ask yourself the question, “Am I truly a follower of Jesus?” Paul forgave this man, and he forgave the Corinthians because God enabled him to do it through the Holy Spirit. True forgiveness doesn’t excuse the sin or the offense against us. It doesn’t gloss over anything. It doesn’t minimize or rationalize it away. Like Paul did here, deal with it in a direct, honest, and godly way with the goal being reconciliation with the person who offended us. That’s the Jesus way to resolve any and all conflicts. And Paul followed Jesus’ example, because he had a cruciform life – a cross-shaped life.

Dr. Robert Smith, a pastor and seminary professor, will never forget the darkest day of his life: October 30th. His son, Tony, was working at a restaurant when four young men got into the store, jammed the safe, and then grabbed him after jamming the register. When he could not open it, the other three fled and the last one stood on top of the counter and fired one shot into his body. Thirty-four years of life ended suddenly. After some time had passed, the Lord moved on Dr. Smith’s heart to write the young man. He’s in prison now. He was 17 when he murdered Tony. It took his son’s murderer over two years to respond in writing, and this is the letter Dr. Smith received.

"Dear Mr. Smith, let me say that I am truly sorry for your loss. I really am. Also, I hope that this is really you I am writing because I have received a lot of threat mail from your family members and friends. So that's why I never wrote back. But today I thought that I should give it a try because I really wanted to talk to you. I've been locked up three years now. They've been the worst three years of my life.... You know, I grew up in church my whole life. I just hung with the wrong crowd on that night. I'm sorry. You probably know my pastor, Rev. ? I hope to hear from you very, very soon. Thank you for forgiving me. Can you keep praying for me too? This is getting too hard for me to bear, and sometimes I feel just like giving up on life."

Robert Smith writes, "The Lord just kept working on my heart because the Lord let me see what it took for Him to forgive me. He let me see what a mess I was. He let me understand that when He forgives He forgives unconditionally. He wanted me to understand that if you ever want to get beyond this you've got to forgive, that you can't do it on your own. So I wrote this young man because I want to be on his visitation list. I want to go up to tell him about Jesus. I want to let him know that I love him. I want this young man and my son to hug together in heaven one day. Because forgiveness is not difficult; forgiveness is impossible without God."

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? If so, you will likely face your share of conflicts in life, because even godly people have them. Whatever you do, keep your integrity intact. And however you get offended or hurt, be ready and willing to forgive. The Holy Spirit inside of you will make it possible. Because forgiveness is not difficult; forgiveness is impossible without God.