
Handling Conflict

Philippians 4:1-9

Russ Kennedy

The trouble with conflict:

When it is irreconcilable –when someone is simply wrong.

When it is divisive – when people are gathering up followings.

When it is personal – when what is valued is being challenged or taken.

So four questions to launch our thinking:

How do you handle conflict in your relationships?

How do you respond to difficult people?

What are your biggest difficulties in conflict?

How do you handle when a treasure (money, thing, position, ministry, agenda, identity) gets entangled in a conflict?

Relationships are to be Strengthened

(v. 1-3)

As Paul brings this book to close, he focuses in on the actual people involved in the partnership threatening conflict. He highlights our responsibility to help people who are in conflict.

By Expressing our Love

(v. 1)

¹ Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

Three times in a single sentence, love for the people in the church is affirmed. In love for them, he calls all to please God in the midst of a situation where sin and self threaten the steady forward advance of the gospel. Paul is affirming his love even as he prepares to call names.

As those who are deeply loved, they are to stand firm. The sense here is of an ordered array like a military formation. They are standing firm in formation with godly leaders who have set them an example. They are standing firm in formation against the enemies of the cross, whose lifestyle and mindset are focused on and shaped by this present world. Do not abandon the formation to hit each other with your swords and shields – stand together knowing who the true enemies are. They are standing firm with all those heavenly citizens and like-minded servants, all who are enrolled in the book of life.

By Helping People**(v. 2-3)**

² I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. ³ 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.

Here Paul, from a distance, begins to launch resolving the personal conflict that threatened the partnership. Through patient appeals, he entreats each of these two ladies to have the same mind, the same attitude, the same orientation of the heart in the Lord.

While in a position to exercise authority, he chooses to appeal. Having laid a foundation of relational love and unity, he urges change. He does call names. We know the names of these two ladies. He has singled them out as the source of the conflict. He is not satisfied with mere external accord, but calls for internal harmony. They need, each of them, to have the same mindset. He appeals to the sources of conflict to realign their thinking with Christ.

This will be accomplished close at hand by faithful helpers. In a curious turn of the language, this is a person's name that means "true or loyal yokefellow". A person or people who are partners together with Paul are to come alongside and facilitate the conflict resolution. These ladies have served well with Paul in the past standing in good formation with Clement and others who also are on the team, their names in the book of life.

Characteristics are to be Cultivated**(v.4-7)**

So while the conflict is being wound down and unity being cultivated, what is to characterize all who are involved.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Our Rejoicing in the Lord**(v.4)**

We are to be a people whose joy is in the Lord. This is a command. This is what we are to do as we work at resolving conflict. Syzygus, Clement, Euodia and Syntyche are to rejoice in the Lord while they are working at becoming one minded with Christ and eventually with one another.

Yet conflict often causes us to lose our joy. We are unhappy. We are sad, confused, downcast. Joylessness then becomes a symptom that conflict is going on. Yet, Paul seems to calling us to gladness in our hearts and joy in the Lord even as we are in the process of reconciliation. While conflict is being resolved, be characterized by joy. Rejoice in the Lord.

Our Reasonableness before the Lord**(v.5)**

We are to be a people who are known by our reasonableness. It is so easy to become hard, difficult and unreasonable in the midst of conflict. As a result, we are unable to see the other person's view. Our sin blinds us from seeing our Savior. Our hearts are stubborn and unwilling to bow to the will or the wisdom of God.

In the midst of conflict, be known as a sweetly reasonable and approachable person.

Our Requests to the Lord (v.6)

In the midst of conflict, because of the nearness of the Lord and the greatness of our burdens and anxieties, we must bring our petitions to the Lord. Here is another good verse with many wide applications yet often dragged, kicking and screaming out of its context. When is it most important that our bathed in gratitude prayers and supplications be made to the Lord? Precisely when conflict and relational difficulty is giving rise to anxieties and worries. In the midst of conflict, when worries and anxieties rise, speak to God about your requests with a heart full of gratitude.

Our Rest from the Lord (v.7)

Now, some of you have been wondering why in the world I am connecting verses 1-3 with verses 4-7. I do so because of the promise that is given here. The peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. It makes all the sense in the world. Work to help people resolve conflict. In the midst of resolving conflict, be this kind of person. And, God's peace will defend your heart and mind from turmoil, anxiety, anger and further conflict.

Attitudes are to be Examined (v.8-9)

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

We often think of this paragraph as a purity filter, lifting the text out of its context and never applying it to conflict. But the connection is there in verse 9. The God of peace will be alongside of us as we think and follow in ways pleasing to God in the midst of resolving conflict.

In What We Think (v.8)

Before we examine this illustrative list of heart-talk guiding and guarding virtues, I want to address the last phrase first so that you will hear clearly what Paul is driving at.

Why does Paul choose these particular things as things to think about? He chooses these because of our sinful tendencies in the midst of conflict to listen to and think about the vices these virtues correct. Relational difficulties tend to provoke us and to tempt us into sinful thoughts. Therefore, notice the verb here – *think* on these things. In other words, be on guard against fantasizing, thinking about scenarios, self-talk about the person or around the situation. Watch replaying conversations and situations and rewriting the script. Watch for those thoughts that are planning what you are going to say or do – are those heart orientations and plans pleasing to the Lord?

All that follows does not exclude accurate assessment of sin, confrontation of evil thoughts and behavior. But even when we are admonishing others in the

midst of conflict or disagreement, we must carefully guard our hearts and reflect the following as the primary flow of words in our hearts.

True (Untrue)	Our tendency is to listen to and to think about things that are not true. Do you entertain lies about people or situations? Do you play out untrue fantasies and scenarios in your mind? Is your self-talk in conflict filled with what actually is real, what actually is true?
Honorable (Disrespectful)	Our tendency is to listen to and to think about things that dishonorable or disrespectful of those we are in conflict with. We delight in seeing or hearing or even putting them down ourselves. We are quick to impute dishonorable motives to their actions. Is your self-talk in conflict full of good character and respect of the other person?
Just (False accusations)	Our tendency is to listen to and think about things that are not just or right about the person or situation. We tend to think in terms of vengeance and getting even. Our minds are filled with “striking-back” plans and hopes. We are not pursuing what is right and just in the conflict, even when it will exonerate the other person. Are you thinking about and pursuing in your thoughts and actions what is just and right in the midst of conflict?
Pure (Impure)	Our tendency is to listen to and think about things that charge the person with sin. We also tend just to be sinful in our thoughts about the other person – wishing them evil. The word here is not primarily the idea of sexual purity but of blemished, moral defect, sinfully crippling. We simply focus on where the person actually fails in such a way that we see them in our own mind is irreparable, irredeemably flawed in character or conduct. Men, there can come a sexual element in your thoughts if conflict is with a woman and your thoughts have sexual overtones of domination – a struggle some men have found in their mind to their dismay. Is your thinking about the person or situation filled with sin? Is your thinking focused on the other persons’ whole cluster of depravity, sin and failure? Are you thinking about and hoping for purity to emerge in the person and situation?
Lovely (Ugly)	Our tendency is to listen to and think about all the unlovely, displeasing things about the other person. We tend to focus on the warts, bumps, disfigurements so that we distort the person in our mind. We are thinking in caricatures, not in realities. We seek out the ugliness in a person and focus on it, highlighting in our own mind and in our conversations with others. Is your self-talk in conflict re-

hearing and repeating all the ugly things you know about the person or situation? Are you recognizing and praising in your own thoughts where the grace of God and the character of Christ is producing lovely virtues?

Commendable
(Contemptible)

Our tendency is to listen to and think about all the things that we disapprove of and are not commendable in the situation or person. In order to justify our attitudes and actions, we focus on the negatives, failures, foolishness, ignorance, simplicity, silliness of the person. Is your self-talk about the other person focusing on and filled with words that highlight their strengths, their virtues, their abilities?

Now, two overarching categories that are to guide and guard our thoughts in the midst of conflict.

Things excellent
(Worthless)

The word is pointing **virtues**, to moral excellence. In all your thinking about the person, do you mull over and meditate primarily on their virtues? In the situation, do you highlight where and how God is at work?

Things praiseworthy
(Condemnable)

The word is pointing to **values**, that is, to those things that reflect the work of God in the person and thus glorify God. In all your thinking about the other person or the situation, do you seek to focus primarily on what is good, valuable, and worthy of praise?

As we are working to resolve conflict, may we think on things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, therefore things that are full of value and virtue.

Finally, it is useful to use these as a guide and guard for our general thought life as well. After all, it is wrong to have a thought life filled with untrue, shameful, wrong, impure, ugly, contemptible, worthless, worthy to be condemned thoughts.

In Whom We Follow

(v.9)

So, who do you strive to be like in the midst of conflict? Who are your models, who do you seek to follow when you are struggling in marital or ministry conflict? Paul had taught and practiced all of these in the many conflicts that attended his ministry. His teaching and conduct are to be learned, observed, and practiced in the way wisdom dictates.

THE RESULT IS THE GOD OF PEACE WILL BE WITH US. It is plural here. Usually, Paul's use of the plural here is highlighting the corporate, community aspect. When people are pleasing to God in the midst of differences, debates and conflict, then the peace of God will guard individual hearts and minds and the God of peace will be face-to-face among the believing community.

Reflect and Respond

How is such as this possible? Because we have learned **Philippians 2:1–18 (NLT)**

Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose.

Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.

Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Dear friends, you always followed my instructions when I was with you. And now that I am away, it is even more important. Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.

Do everything without complaining and arguing, so that no one can criticize you. Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people. Hold firmly to the word of life; then, on the day of Christ's return, I will be proud that I did not run the race in vain and that my work was not useless. But I will rejoice even if I lose my life, pouring it out like a liquid offering to God, just like your faithful service is an offering to God. And I want all of you to share that joy. Yes, you should rejoice, and I will share your joy.

Be aware of what is at stake when we allow conflict to divide us: our partnerships and relationships will be broken and our witness ruined.

Seek to be a peacemaker, someone who through love helps people to resolve conflict and thus stand firm in the Lord.

Be marked by joyfulness, reasonableness, prayerfulness and peacefulness in the midst of resolving conflict and restoring relationships.

Guard carefully your thought life – yes, always, but particularly in the midst of conflict. Seek to be pleasing to God in the focus of your thinking.

When we sometimes struggle in our homes, our schools, our business and our ministry, may God be pleased to grant us His peace and His presence for the glory of His name.