

I've heard it said that conflict is "natural and normal." It's simply a part of life. **You can't have a relationship with someone – be it a friend, a spouse, a co-worker, or class mate – and not have some level of conflict at some point.** One favorite place for people to engage in conflict and disagreement is online in social media. The irony of that, of course, is that it's probably the worst place to try and actually work through a conflict...but nonetheless, that's where we find ourselves in the 21st Century.

A few years ago there were a variety of things being discussed in a very conflictual manner, on a Facebook page called "Be Neighborly Kirkland". It's a page for people who live in Kirkland where they can share local news things, ask questions about the community, get recommendations on auto repair shops and restaurants, and so forth. Many of you are part of it and I see at least some of your posts and comments. Most of what happens on this page is great, and is community-building. Some of the conversations, however, devolve into conflict and arguing.

At one point a few years ago, and I think this has come around a time or two since then, conflicts were becoming so commonplace that someone shared a photo with an accompanying caption in an effort to calm people down. It was a photo of a stick, and the caption said, "To prove that people will argue over anything, here is a stick." And then the comments below the post were littered with people's arguments about what they perceived the stick to actually be. In other words, we argued about whether or not a stick was, in fact, a stick. The conversation that ensued in the comments was pretty funny: It was part philosophical conversation ("What makes a chair, a chair") and part "Jerry Springer fake-conflict" and cheesy humor. In the end, it was a light-hearted way to calm people down.



But the fact is, conflict really is natural and normal. (Anyone here not experienced conflict in relationships?) Yes, it's a side-effect of sin. The first conflict occurred in the Garden of Eden between Adam and Eve and between

them and God after they disobeyed God. Ever since then, conflict is part of being human, and that includes in the church. And this morning we see a conflict that arose between Paul and Peter, two of the great church leaders in the first few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. So, let's turn to **Galatians 2:11-21** as we continue our series through the book of Galatians....

Throughout this letter so far, Paul has been building a case for the churches in the region of Galatia to return to the good news of Jesus, the gospel of Jesus, because they've turned to something else. And you may recall that last week we saw how Peter and Paul and others were able to come together and agree that indeed, Jesus is enough. **The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus teaches/demonstrates this, and they clung to that message and proclaimed it.** Whether a person was Jewish or Gentile didn't matter. Race, nationality, religious background all falls by the wayside. All that matters is one's relationship with Jesus.

But sometimes, even when we believe something to be true, we act differently. Peter believed one thing, but acted differently. Peter was a Jewish Christian. He grew up Jewish. He knew it forwards and backwards, all the rituals, all the stuff that was required, and so forth. And he agreed that yes, all of that is fulfilled in Jesus and isn't necessary any more when one is a disciple of Jesus.

And so Peter even ate with Gentiles and didn't require them to follow Jewish food purity laws and customs or anything else of the sort. In fact, you may recall the vision that Peter has three separate times and is recorded for us in Acts 10 where God makes it abundantly clear that all food is "clean" to eat, and with the main point being that it's ok to visit with and hang out and eat meals with Gentiles. **The Old Testament food restrictions and purity laws that would literally keep them at separate dinner tables no longer apply.**

So Peter starts eating with Gentiles, which was a big deal. It showed the full acceptance of non-Gentiles who believed in Jesus. It communicated that they're all on the same playing field; there aren't "classes" of Jesus-followers. But then something happened. Some people "came from James" as

Paul puts it. James was another early church leader, based in Jerusalem, the heart of Judaism. His ministry is to Jewish Christians. And a delegation of them come to Peter and appear to have swayed him away from what he and the others believed to be the truth of the gospel message that Jesus taught and lived. **And so Peter starts to change. He pulls away from the Gentile Christians.** Then some of the other Jewish Christians who were with him start to pull away as well. And pretty soon, they've got two different groups. It's like two churches under one roof, where one church – made up of Jewish Christians – believes it is superior to the other – made up of Gentile Christians. Peter gave in to the pressure applied by Jewish Christians who had come to visit from Jerusalem.

One author I read this week writes: “[Hospital] Nurses have mentioned a pattern of behavior to me: first a wife will kiss her husband (who is in the hospital) on the mouth, then on the cheek, then the forehead, and finally she will blow him a kiss from the door. The change is not lost on him.”¹ Similarly, Peter is slowly pulling away from Gentile Christians, and it creates division: the change is not lost on them.

So, this is a conflict. And Paul relates all this to the Galatian churches and then tells them how he confronted Peter about it. Paul said to him, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?” (Galatians 2:14). In fact “Jewish customs” is kind of a soft translation, though it fits the discussion well. More literally, however, the word means “live like Jews” He closes this section with words that summarize the argument, **“I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Galatians 2:21).** This summarizes the entire argument he’s making for the Galatians to get back to the gospel message he gave them: that Christ is enough. It’s not “Jesus plus” anything else. If we could live a righteous life/have a right relationship with God through following rules – what he calls “the law” and earlier calls them “Jewish customs” – then Jesus’ death is useless.

There is some scholarly debate about *when* this (Peter not eating with Jews and Paul confronting him) happened. In the verses we looked at last week,

and as I already mentioned, Peter was on board with the truth that Jews and Gentiles are the same in Christ. He believed that Jesus is enough. Therefore, some contend that today's passage are events that actually happened *before* last week's passage, even though they come after in this letter, because how could Peter slip back into old ways of living? But it's not the first time Peter had done this – we see it in the gospels even. And the fact is, we can *all* believe one thing and then live differently – especially if there is some peer pressure from people that we may know, or respect. Certainly, with the group who came from James, that would have been the case for Peter – he knew them or at least knew of them. And so he slipped up. It happens, and it shouldn't surprise that it might happen to Peter.

Then, in the first half of verse 20 Paul writes some words that are perhaps the best known in this letter. He says, **“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20a)**. This is the work that Jesus has done on our behalf – his death is sufficient to make us righteous, to make us right with God. And so righteousness is not about what we do, it's not about how we live, but about what Jesus has done. God sees us as if Jesus in us. We let go of our old selves, meaning our sinful selves – it's crucified – and Christ now lives in us instead. From this new place, we then live in a way that, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, let's our light shine so that people would glorify our father in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).

But Peter shows us that we can be inconsistent in how we do that. We don't always let the light shine brightly. We can believe one thing, but then live differently. This is why confession of sin and seeking God's forgiveness and grace is something we Christians do regularly, to stay in step with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There are a few things we can learn from this passage that will help us to stay out of the pothole that Peter fell in, and find a better way forward that honors Jesus.

First: Recognize that old habits die hard, especially when there are relationships connected to them. This is a kind of conflict that each and every one of us battles – whether there are relational connections involved or not. Did you used to struggle with an addiction – like cigarettes, alcohol,

pornography, shopping, drugs, and so forth? Did you have a problem with anger? Forgiveness? Have you struggled to see people different than you as image bearers like you are? Pride? Hoarding? We could develop this list all day long so I'll move on, but you get the picture. God sets you free from that stuff...that old self gets crucified with Christ when we confess them and receive the gift of grace that the cross is. But that doesn't mean there isn't still a battle to live out. There's an internal conflict that can rage inside of us – like the devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other, each trying to coax us in a certain direction.

This is why it's so important to surround ourselves with people who will support and encourage us in what we believe and also how we live it out – much as Paul did for Peter that we read about here. We need other Christians in our life – even in a pandemic. Who is helping you to live so that the “old you” stays crucified and the “new you” can be filled by Jesus? We need that encouragement and support and accountability, because there's an internal conflict between our old self which was defined by sin, and our new self which is defined by Jesus Christ.

Second: For Christians, our allegiance and our loyalty is to Christ first, and everything else falls in line after that. So it's not just the conflict with our old selves and the sin that so easily entangles and that we confess; there is a conflict with *good* things in our lives, too, which also vie for the first position in our lives. We touched on this a little bit last week, but it carries into this passage...and a commentary I read this week on today's passage made this point in a rather blunt and appropriate to the times. Here's what it said:

“We should never underestimate the emotional power of national pride and racial ties. We should not be surprised that the Jewish Christians in Antioch put their own Jewish interests above the welfare of the church. Throughout the history of the church, conflicts and divisions have occurred because Christians have been more deeply influenced by their national interests or racial identity than their Christian convictions.

“Whenever we identify ourselves as American Christians, or British Christians, or Chinese Christians, or German Christians, we must be aware that being American, British, Chinese or German may easily become more important to us than being Christian” (Walter Hansen, IVP Commentary: Galatians). He wrote that in 1994, which isn’t all that long ago, of course, but we are reminded recently that we still need to hear this message. Political allegiances, for example, fall in line behind our allegiance to Jesus. Jesus is Lord over everything in the life of the Christian, and while this may cause conflict at times, our identity *is* in him. We Christians would do well to ask: Does my life – from my head and my heart to my hands and my feet – demonstrate the lordship of Jesus, or something else?

Third: We see that pride is often the source of conflict. For the Jews of the day, in regards to their relationship with God, they had a great sense of pride – both some “good” pride but also a healthy dose of “not so good” pride, especially for the Pharisees. In their own eyes, they were righteous and holy and everyone else was sinners...and they wouldn’t even sit at the same table for a meal. But the gospel levels the playing field and says that we are all sinners and in need of God’s grace. That was a tough pill for them to swallow as we’ve talked about for a couple weeks now. But that gets to their pride, and that’s something we all struggle with. And pride is the source of a lot of conflict – with God, and with other people.

There once were a couple of hermits who lived together for many years without a quarrel. One day, one said to the other, “Let’s have a quarrel with each other, as other men do.” The other answered, “I don’t know how a quarrel happens.” The first said, “Look here, I put a brick between us, and I say, ‘That’s mine.’ Then you say, ‘No, it’s mine.’ That is how you begin a quarrel.” So they put a brick between them and one of them said, “That’s mine.” The other said, “No, it’s mine.” The first answered, “Yes, it’s yours. Take it away.”² They were unable to argue with each other because they lacked any pride.

John Stott writes, **“Most quarrels are due to a misunderstanding, and the misunderstanding is due to our failure to appreciate the other person’s**

point of view.” “It is more natural to us to talk than to listen, to argue than to submit. This is true in industrial disputes as much as in domestic quarrels. Many conflicts...could be resolved if both sides first examined themselves critically and then examined the other side charitably, rather than our normal practice of being charitable to ourselves and critical of others...Our outlook is one-sided. **“We exaggerate the virtues in ourselves and the vices in others.”**³ When we do that, our pride is getting the best of us. Have you struggled with that at all?

Is there conflict in your marriage or at work or school or in some other relationship? Be more like the hermits...be more like what John Stott suggests...**Consider doing a little more listening, a little more acknowledgement of the other person’s views, and a little more confession of your own sin when you do open your mouth to speak.** It’s amazing how healing that can be in the midst of a conflict.

And if you need some inspiration for this, to help you along, I’ll suggest two things. One is from me, the other is Biblical ☺. First, get a stick from your backyard or a neighborhood park, and keep it in your home or on your desk at work (which is at home right now, I realize...but bring it to your office when you return) and keep it as a reminder that it’s easy to argue about the silliest things – like whose turn it is to do the dishes or take out the trash or which way the toilet paper roll should be go. (That’s the dumbest of all because it’s obvious: over the top. ☺). Some conflicts really just aren’t worth getting into.

Second: memorize Galatians 2:20, or print it out and put it in a place you’ll see it regularly. Let’s read this together: **“I am crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).** If you’ve confessed your sin and put your faith in Jesus, that verse is a reality, and God sees you as he sees Jesus! But there may be some internal conflicts that rage in regards to sin; even good things like our citizenship or employment allegiances can come in conflict with Jesus, so let’s keep them in their place; and perhaps chief among them all, our pride needs to be crucified with Christ and stay in the tomb. Jesus is your all in all, the one who defines you.

So don't be like Peter in these events. He believed something, but he didn't live it out. Let your theology inform your daily living so that people would see that it is no longer you who lives, but Christ who lives in you. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ From a solid online commentary on Galatians at Bible.org. https://bible.org/seriespage/6-peter-s-capitulation-and-paul-s-correction-galatians-211-21#P555_199013

² Pastorsworkshop.com – This is a pay site that I was able to have a free visit to and happened to find this cute but helpful story.

³ John Stott, <https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-2/sermon-illustrations-conflict/>. John was one of the most influential pastors/authors of the last 40 years or more. He died in 2011 – something I thought to look up after I preached this sermon (I mentioned at the 11:00 service I thought he'd passed away but I wasn't sure).