

Resolving Conflicts Together

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PAUL CALLS US TO STAND FIRM

Have you ever eaten a burrito right before going on a long run?

Let's just say that it's a big mistake.

Over lunch one day I told a friend I was planning to go for a run that afternoon. He mentioned that he had been running recently as well, so I invited him to join me.

He thought it sounded like fun, so he accepted.

Knowing that I was running in an hour, I decided to have a light salad and water to drink.

He was chowing down on a cheese burrito.

I asked him if he would be "okay" running after eating, and he said that he should be fine.

We finished lunch, each went to our own homes, changed clothes, and met to run.

We were planning to run four miles. However, by the time we finished the first mile, he was so cramped up that we turned around and walked more than we ran back to starting line.

Why? Because spicy foods irritate our stomachs and make it difficult to run.

Worse, fatty foods (like a cheesy burrito) are difficult to digest.

The combination sapped his strength and made running difficult and uncomfortable.

In Philippians 4:1, Paul calls us to stand firm.

But as we hear this call today, remember that there are things that can sap our strength and make standing firm more difficult. Paul wrote,

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

Way back in Philippians 1:27, Paul linked standing firm with standing together.

In **Philippians 1:27** Paul wrote:

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel ...

The first thing to notice is that Paul used the same word in 1:27 that he did in 4:1 to call the saints in Philippi and us to stand firm.

However, notice that he paired it here with standing together "in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel."

Like Philippians 1:27, Philippians chapter 4 encourages us to stand together if we hope to stand firm. Why? Because other Christians help us to stand firm. Plus, striving side by side with other Christians helps us to stand firm. That's the positive message.

However, it's also true that we can't stand firm when we can't stand together.

WE CAN'T STAND FIRM WHEN WE CAN'T STAND TOGETHER

In Philippians 4:2-3 Paul named two people involved in a conflict among the saints in Philippi.

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

Paul mentioned two leaders in the church by name, Euodia and Syntyche.

He implied that they were in a conflict with one another.

It's hard to believe that Paul named names!

It was extraordinarily uncommon in the ancient world to name the names of people involved in a conflict in correspondence like this.¹

It wasn't polite to call people out as "bad guys" publicly, and Paul didn't make it a habit.

So did Paul call out Euodia and Syntyche as "bad guys" in Philippi? Quite the opposite.

Paul said that Euodia and Syntyche had labored side by side with him in the gospel.

He put them alongside his "true companion," Clement, and all the rest whose names were written in the book of life.

The book of life is the heavenly record that God created before the foundation of the world where those who are headed to his kingdom find their names written.

Revelation 20:12 says that it will be the basis for final judgment:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.

Euodia and Syntyche have names written in the book of life which means that they're good guys, not troublemakers. However, they were involved in a conflict.

That's oddly comforting. Even back in the New Testament, conflict among Christians was real.

I've been a Christian since I was seven years old, and I have been a pastor for over 30 years, so I could probably give you one example of conflict between Christians after another.

However, it's still not a good idea to name names in the 21st century.

I do remember that even back when I was in college, there were two large evangelical Christian ministries on our campus—Baptist Campus Ministry and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

There were a few people who were members of both, and we both knew that we were ultimately on the same team, but at the same time, we were kind of rivals as well.

We each had our own meetings. We each had our own outreaches. We each had our own t-shirts. And we each thought we were better than the other.

It was a friendly rivalry. Most of the time.

¹ Fee, 389.

But even thinking back to those days, I remember that there were times when our friendly rivalry got a little more heated and a little more prideful.

Why? Because even Christians get into conflicts.

Now, why do I find it comforting that there is conflict in the New Testament among Christians?

Because the presence of conflict among Christians in the New Testament reminds me that I'm not alone, you're not alone, and we're not alone.

Conflicts happened back then between Christians, and conflicts sometimes happen now among Christians. That's the good news.

There is bad news, though.

Think back to Philippians 1:27. Paul longed to hear that the saints in Philippi were standing firm and standing together as they worked for the gospel.

However, flipping that verse around leads to two dire warnings.

First, when we can't stand together, we can't share the gospel effectively. Paul could see that the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche threatened the unity of the church as people took sides.

Second, when we can't stand together, we can't stand firm either. In place of the encouragement and help we're supposed to give to each other, we sap strength from one another.

So Paul entreated Euodia and entreated Syntyche to "agree" in the Lord.

To "entreat" means that Paul urged, encouraged, and implored them; To entreat them to "agree in the Lord."

He didn't entreat them to put their differences aside.

Instead, he entreated them to get their heads together.

Plus, he entreated them to agree that being in Christ together was more important than the differences they had.

That's a great thought, but then there's a question: How were they supposed to agree? Paul gave some very practical advice in the verses that followed. We want to get these verses for ourselves, because this is a critical thought for us as well. We want to know how to address conflicts, particularly with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

KEY #1: REACH OUT FOR HELP

Back again in Philippians 4:3 Paul asked for help in solving the conflict.

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.

Paul asked his "true companion" to help Euodia and Syntyche resolve their conflict.

Now, Paul called on someone so well known that he didn't feel the need to name him. Paul simply called on his "true companion" or "loyal yokefellow" to help Euodia and Syntyche settle their conflict.

Paul looped in "the rest of my fellow workers" in a nod to their importance.

However, his "true companion" had the skills to get this job done.

Paul’s “true companion” reminds us that some conflicts require help in order to solve them.

That was the case with the border conflict between North and South Carolina.

The conflict started in the 1600s when North and South Carolina were split from one another.

After negotiations, a survey of the border was started in the 1730s; it went off course and stalled due to lack of funding south of Charlotte, NC.

The survey didn’t resume until the 1760s. But when surveyors resumed their work, they discovered that they had drawn the border too far south. Without erasing anything they had done, they shifted their work northward which accounts for the odd notch in South Carolina. Then they gave South Carolina “credit” for the land it had lost as they finished their work.

The problem is that the surveyors made their marks based on trees, rocks, and landmarks that existed in the 1700s. Over time, those landmarks disappeared, and the border was unclear.²

For over 200 years, the problem simmered.

It wasn’t until the 21st century when a land deal prompted the two states to resume negotiations to settle their dispute.

Negotiators couldn’t get the job done alone, so they appointed a commission.

The commission was able to get the job done.

Finally, in 2017, the border between North and South Carolina was set.

However, without help, a conflict simmered for nearly 300 years.³

We don’t want to wait 300 years to resolve our conflicts!

Matthew 18:15-20 shows us how to reach out for help when we have conflicts we can’t solve.

It contains a simple but wise and difficult process.

The process includes four effective steps toward resolving a conflict:

Step 1: Speak to the person who has wronged you. It’s much simpler to tell your story and recruit other people to take your side, but it’s much more effective to speak to the person involved in the conflict directly.

Step 2: Take one or two other people along with you. Follow step #2 only if you were unsuccessful at resolving the conflict with a direct, empathetic conversation. Other people can help to sort through the good, bad, and irrelevant of what happened. Then, if the conflict is still not resolved through the intervention of some wise, Christian friends:

Step 3: Seek help from leaders. For us, help from the church starts with the elders. The elders are supposed to be spiritually wise and dedicated to the good of the entire church. If the elders are unsuccessful in resolving the conflict, then there is a fourth step:

Step 4: Turn to the church. Sometimes conflicts can’t be resolved, and it may be necessary for the church to stop the conflict. Those are tragic and rare circumstances. For our congregation, those actions may still be taken by the elders.

² <https://www.ncpedia.org/boundaries-state> on 2020-11-12.

³ <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/politics-government/article79676647.html> on 2020-11-12.

KEY #2: REASONABLENESS MUST REPLACE ANXIETY

Philippians 4:4-7 contains a key to resolving conflict that puts us on the path to peace.

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

Twice in verse 4, Paul calls on us to rejoice. Paul wrote about rejoicing before.

Rejoicing can help settle conflicts; however, this week we are focusing on reasonableness.

What does Paul mean by the word “reasonableness?”

The term translated here as “reasonableness” means something like gentleness, so it is translated in some places as gentleness.

That makes reasonableness sound like weakness in a strange kind of way.

However, reasonableness comes from strength, not weakness.

The Greek word for “reasonableness” implies the behavior of kings, nobles, and leaders.

They must be reasonable or gentle not because they are weak but—rather—because they are powerful. They have all the power they need, so they must be reasonable in how they use it!

In the same way, Paul tells us to take care how we conduct ourselves. Don't lose your cool.

Reasonableness must replace anxiety.

While reasonableness may be a little bit foreign to us, anxiety is something we understand.

Anxiety is our response to the cares of life. These are the cares that keep us awake. These are the cares we look to get away from or that we want refuge from.

In the Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew 6:25**, Jesus cautioned us about anxiety:

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”

He knew that the cares of life would become anxieties to us. But he went on to reassure us that God knows our needs and cares for us just as he does the flowers of the field, and the birds of the air, even though they are far less valuable than we are.

Instead, he said in **Matthew 6:33**,

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

It's a perspective that helps us fight anxiety, and we want to fight anxiety, because anxiety leads us to be anything but reasonable. Anxiety then leads to some of the worst conflicts in life.

So what are we to do to fight all the anxiety we feel?

Prayer is the key to accessing the strength that enables clearer heads to prevail.

Paul counseled the saints in Philippi (and us) to approach everything through prayers and supplications. That means we should take all of our anxieties and conflicts to God in prayer.

But not just our anxieties and conflicts! Paul tells us to bring thanksgiving to God right along with our prayers. Why? Because thanksgiving, praise, and joy are all antidotes to anxiety and lead us to be reasonable!

Prayer, thanksgiving, praise, and joy all unlock the source of power for us.

Remember that I told you reasonableness is based in power. Only those with a certain amount of power can be truly reasonable.

Our power comes in the pivot and in the prayer. "The Lord is near," Paul wrote.

The resurrection power of Jesus is coming; when it does, the world will change.

The resurrection power of Jesus is welling up inside of us; as it does, we too change.

We can pray, because the Lord is near.

We can be reasonable, because the Lord is near.

What's ruling your life? Reasonableness or anxiety?

If you feel like your life is swerving all over the place right now, then you probably feel a great deal of anxiety, and that probably means that you are surrounded by conflict.

If you feel like your life is grounded right now in the Lord, if you can sense that the Lord is near, then you probably feel a great deal of reasonableness right now, and that probably means that conflicts in your life may happen, but you are able to deal with them.

Are you afraid and consequently lashing out at people?

Or are you confident and keeping your temper under control?

What's ruling your life right now?

If anxiety is ruling your life, then turn that over to God in prayer with thanksgiving.

KEY #3: RECKON THE RIGHT STUFF

In Philippians 4:8-9, Paul cautions us to reckon the right stuff when if we want to resolve conflict.

*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. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and **the God of peace** will be with you.*

The word "reckon" helps us to understand what Paul meant better than the word "think."

The word "think" leads us to believe that the Apostle Paul is encouraging us to fill our minds with happy, productive thoughts. There is a degree to which Paul was saying exactly that.

But Paul was saying more. He was telling us to remember that our lives and our world are both already filled with amazing things of God and from God.

The word Paul used here counseled us to "reckon" or "count" the good things God has already given to us.

Paul wanted us to be aware of and intentional about the things that grab our attention.

He wanted us to make decisions about the things we let through the filters of our minds.

We want to be sure that we let the right stuff get lodged in our minds.

Otherwise, our brains don't always reckon the right stuff.

We don't always let the right stuff grab our attention.

We don't always let the right stuff through the filter.

We don't always let the right stuff get lodged.

A study published in 2016 by the National Academy of Sciences demonstrated that we don't always reckon, take stock of, or react to the right stuff.

They measured the level of disgust college students felt when they sniffed sweaty t-shirts.

That's right. They asked college students to sniff sweaty t-shirts. Then they measured the amount of time the students took to walk to the sink and the number of pumps of soap they used to wash their hands.

What they discovered will probably not surprise you.

They found their rivals' t-shirts more disgusting than their own.

Of course, all the t-shirts were covered in the same amount of sweat.⁴

Our brains don't always let the right stuff grab our attention, they don't always let the right stuff through the filter, and they don't always let the right stuff get lodged.

We have to train our brains on what to "reckon" or "count."

Otherwise, we will spend our lives living with one conflict after another.

Paul gave himself as an example once again.

He himself had made one choice after another about how to look at the world around him.

He had chosen repeatedly to see God's plan at work to build the Church and bless him.

He made the same choice about the people around him. Rather than allowing every conflict he faced to tear away his joy or his faith in people, he had chosen to look at people as precious to God and allies (when possible) who could stand side by side with him in sharing the gospel.

He did that time after time in this letter to the church in Philippi.

Now he told them to put into practice what he had disciplined them in.

Reasonableness and reckoning the right stuff lead to God's peace.

After telling them to stand firm in the Lord, Paul implied that conflict would keep them from standing firm. It would sap their strength and ruin their work for Jesus.

Consequently, Paul told the saints in Philippi to resolve their conflict.

Twice he said that if they were to reconcile their conflicts, they would have peace.

In verse 7, Paul said that the peace of God would be with them.

And in verse 9 he said that the God of peace would be with them.

Wouldn't you love God's peace today?

⁴ <https://www.pnas.org/content/113/10/2631> on 2020-11-12.