

- **\*READ Romans 12:14-21\*** If you will, picture in your mind the picturesque Thanksgiving family meal scene. A large family is gathered around a table that is covered with delicious looking food. The patriarch leads the family in a prayer of thankfulness, and then everyone begins passing around the different dishes. The whole scene is happy and wonderful...that is until auntie Geraldine takes a bite of the dressing and her fork clangs off her plate as it falls to the floor. With remnants of dressing still on her lips, she looks at her daughter in law and demands to know why the dressing doesn't taste just like grandma Gertrude's dressing did for so many years. The daughter in law looks completely embarrassed and sheepishly replies that she only changed one tiny thing. Little did she know that that one tiny change would set off a chain of reactions that would embroil this once happy Thanksgiving gathering in conflict that might very well last for generations.
  - Now, obviously this little anecdote seems a bit over the top, but we all know or maybe have even been involved in situations that were very similar. Whether it be something like this or any other number of situations, we have all been involved in conflict with other people. When people think of conflict, our minds often go the most extreme cases where we are actually sinned against. We'll talk about those situations this evening, but we must recognize that conflict comes in many shapes and forms. Conflict could be something as simple as a disagreement between friends. It could be hard feelings. It could be a rivalry of some sort. It could be opposing ideas within a company as to how something ought to be done. Conflict can be something that is short lived, or conflict could be something that last for years upon years and stretches for generations. Conflict can arise from any number of incidents whether it be that someone looked at me wrong, to they said the wrong thing, they didn't say anything, or he or she is "doing that just to get on my nerves." We all have seen and been involved in such conflict to one degree or another, and at times we might begin to think that this is just how life is and we ought to just learn to live in a constant state of conflict with others.
  - However, can I suggest that this ought not be so. In fact, in the verses we just read, the Apostle Paul...a man inspired by the Holy Spirit...writes that we ought to give every effort, as much as we can...to live at peace with all men. While it might very well be true that some other people are just hard to get along with, it is still our responsibility to do everything we can to live peaceably with all men. But how can we do that? How can we live at peace with all men? Many men have written many books about resolving the conflicts that might arise between people, we will actually consider some of one this morning, but we must notice that the wisdom of man is truly not his own, but it is the wisdom of God. Let's consider what the Bible teaches us that can help us to be extremely effective at conflict resolution. Let's take out our Bibles and open up our hearts to consider Conflict Resolution 101.
- I. We ought to want to be at peace with all people.**
- A. Let's begin by taking a closer look at something we just mentioned concerning the fact that we are to be a people who seek to "be at peace with all men." (**Romans 12:18**) The context of this statement is a discussion by the Apostle Paul as to what it looks like when Christians are offering themselves as sacrifices to the Lord, not being conformed to this world, and loving without hypocrisy. (**Romans 12:1,2,9**) People who are seeking to live in this manner are people who are willing to put in the effort to live at peace with all men, even if others are not willing to do the same.
  - B. We mentioned that we all probably know people that are just difficult to get along with, but maybe even worse than those people are those who can't seem to live without the constant presence of conflict in their lives. I think there can be a difference between these two individuals. The person who is difficult to live with might want to get along with others, but just has certain traits or characteristics about himself or herself that makes that difficult. This type of person we are much more willing to be patient with than the person who wants the conflict in his or her life.

- C. The person who wants that conflict will take the smallest of matters and blow them up to full on forest fires if at all possible. To this type of person, conflict and turmoil are like drugs that give them a high. To see others people in distress or being troubled actually brings them joy to some degree. This type of person lives a life that is in direct opposition to what Paul tells us in this text. This person is not giving any sort of effort to live at peace, but instead invites the conflict.
- D. Brethren, this ought to never be the way we seek to live this life. When we are constantly giving effort to create conflict or increase problems then we are sinning against our fellow man and against our God who wants His people to be peacemakers who can truly be called children of God. **(Matthew 5:9)** When God's people are at peace with one another then good work can be done for His kingdom, but when conflict arises then at least some of that energy will have to be diverted to dealing with that conflict. Certainly we see why it is that God wants us to be a people who are living at peace with all men.

## **II. However, we need to recognize that conflict is going to happen between people of different backgrounds, preferences, and opinions.**

- A. While it might be that God wants us to be at peace with all men, we must also take a moment to recognize that conflict will happen along the way. Again, go back to this letter that we started out with in the Letter to the Romans. This letter was written to a church that was caught up in much conflict, and the reason for this being the case was that this church was made up of a bunch of people from a wide range of backgrounds who had been used to doing things in a much different way from those that they were now joined together with in Christ.
- B. These differences are well noted in Scripture with one such case being in **John 4** when Jesus speaks with the Samaritan woman by the well. She spoke of how her people worshipped on this mountain while the Jews worshipped in Jerusalem. This difference in worship was a big deal and it led to many conflicts that came once the Gospel was presented to all people of every background, but let me suggest that this wasn't necessarily a horrible thing that couldn't be overcome.
- C. While our conflicts with one another might not revolved around where we worship because of our historical backgrounds, let me suggest that our conflicts are still often a result of us just being different and having these different ideas and opinions and likes and dislikes. Let's also add that simply because conflicts occur doesn't mean that we should just give up. If conflict always ended in people calling it quits then no marriage would last more than a couple of hours! Some people might come upon conflict and their natural reaction is just to call it quits and not even try to resolve the conflict. Wouldn't it have been said if this would've been the way the Roman church had gone about things? Instead of trying to resolve their conflict, they just each packed up their bags and went their separate ways. This isn't to say that that might not need to happen at some point...we'll talk about that kind of resolution in a few minutes, but our natural reaction to conflict shouldn't be to just run away and do nothing because that doesn't solve anything. Remember, we are to be at peace with all men so much so as it depends upon us. That means that we must give an effort to be at peace with all men and overcome conflict. That is our charge from Paul, to give an effort, to do everything we can to resolve conflict and be at peace with all men, so let's finish up with how we can do that. But first, we need to be honest with ourselves about something...

## **III. We don't often naturally handle conflict well.**

- A. I would venture to say that very few of us are born with an natural or innate ability to handle and resolve conflict. Conflict is much like danger in that we react in one or two ways...we either fight or we flight, and this can be seen all the way back to our youth. Think about children, how do they often respond to conflict with another child? If one little boy has a toy and another little boy wants it, either fight or flight kicks in. The one boy might become angry and grab the toy, hit the other boy, or yell angrily at him because he wants the toy. That is the fight response. The flight response would be for the one boy to run to an adult or another person and tattle on the other boy and talk about how he wants the toy and how this adult needs to go get it from this other boy. This is our natural reaction to conflict, and the hope is that as we grow and mature, we get away from this type of reaction to conflict, but unfortunately, that isn't always what happens.

- B. There is a tremendous book that I have read over the past few months that very well details how this is the case in regards to how we approach conflict. The book *“Crucial Conversations”* is not a religious book at all. In fact, it is a book that focuses on business dealings and how we can become more successful at dealing with conflict in the workplace and the conversations that happen because of them. Their research very much supports what I have suggested in that we often continue on our childlike responses to conflict by either fight or flighting. They term our response to conversations that are a result of conflict as either going to silence or violence.
- C. When conflict arises, we often go to silence in regards to the people we have conflict with by not speaking with them about the conflict, but instead by going to anyone and everyone else who will listen and talking about how bad or how wrong this other person is for what has taken place. Friends, let me as clear as I can about this...this type of action falls under the category of slander, backbiting, whispering, and gossip, and these things are condemned in Scripture. Consider what is said by Paul in two separate places about those who practice such things:
- 1) *And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.” (Romans 1:28-32)*
  - 2) *“For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances” (II Corinthians 12:20)*
- D. If we are responding to conflict by going around sharing a problem we have with a particular individual with everyone other than that person then we are guilty of these things and these verses don't paint a very pretty picture for the person guilty of such. The wise man of Proverbs puts it this way, *“A worthless man digs up evil, while his words are like scorching fire. A perverse man spreads strife, and a slanderer separates intimate friends.” (Proverbs 16:27,28)* We must be willing to speak with the people we specifically have a problem with because going around talking with everyone else besides that person does absolutely no good. It slanders that person and he or she has no way of defending themselves against such things, and how can that person help to resolve a problem that he or she has no idea in exists? The same is true for simply holding grudges and never dealing with them. That type of behavior will never help. Then beyond these things and maybe worst of all is the fact that this type of behavior causes strife to be sown among brethren and we know that is something that the Lord truly hates. **(Proverbs 6:19)**
- E. It might not be that we do this, however. Instead, it might be that we go and talk to that person, but instead of speaking in a productive way that leads to a resolution, we speak violently and cause for more harm to be done. We know well from **Proverbs 15:1**, *“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a hard word stirs up anger.”* If we are actually willing to sit down and speak to one another about our conflict, yet we speak angrily and harshly to one another, then how would we ever expect for good to come from that. If we go into a conversation and we don't control our temper, then we will only makes things worse. *“A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but the slow to anger calms a dispute.” (Proverbs 15:18)* These two verses teach us a couple of very important things about conflict and how we can come to resolution. 1) Being angry, harsh, and difficult will get us nowhere when it comes to resolving conflict. Nothing good will come from having a bad attitude or attacking the other person with your words. 2) A resolution will only come when we behave in a Christ-like and mature manner. This leads us to our last point that will help us become better at resolving conflict.

#### IV. Good communication is the key to dealing with conflict and coming to a place of peace with others.

- A. We can't expect to resolve conflict by being whisperers, gossips, or slanderers or by being violent with our words to others. That will never result in being at peace with all men. Instead, we must submit to God's wisdom in how we communicate with one another and seek to be at peace with all men by confronting conflict with godly attitudes and actions.
- B. We must be a people who's words are truly *"always with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know-how you should respond to each person."* (**Colossians 4:6**) We can give effort to be a person who's words are this way by making sure that we are *"quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God."* (**James 1:19,20**) If we have issue or conflict with our brother or sister then we need to first be sure that we prepare ourselves to have good, quality, and productive conversation with them. Again, we'll consider **Matthew 18:15-22** tonight when it comes to how we deal with sin, but I think the pattern holds well that when we have an issue with another then we ought to go to that person and speak to them before anything else. Remember, we don't necessarily naturally do this well. Even those who do this well now might honestly admit that it took them some time and growth to be able to do such a thing, but it is something that needs to be done by each of us.
- C. When we are willing to do these things, when we are willing to *"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from 'us', along with all malice,"* when we are willing to *"be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven 'us',"* (**Ephesians 4:31,32**) then we can be at peace with all people and come to a place of great unity which ought to be the goal for all of us according to what Paul says in **Colossians 3:12-14**
- D. So what does this demand of each of us? It demands that we all truly love one another and that we seek to love others as we would hope for them to love us. It sometimes means being patient with others. We very well might totally disagree with the way someone does a particular thing. We might think it is the wrong way and not the best way, but if it is the way they go about and it is not sinful then we might just need to practice some patience, grin, and bear it. It might be necessary for us to swallow our pride and let a "wrong" done to us not be counted as such. At the worst, it might look like what it looked like between Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark in **Acts 15:36-41**. There was a disagreement, a conflict, between Paul and Barnabas concerning John Mark and him going with them on their journey to visit the churches. That resolution ended up being that they didn't work together on this trip, and sometimes that is just the best thing in order to keep the peace. If we will remember what we want most...which ought to be peace...then we will be willing to go the extra mile to give of ourselves and communicate with others in such a way that peace can be obtained.

It might seem at different points or times in our lives that we will never be able to overcome some sort of conflict that we are involved in with other people. It might seem as if there will never be peace or resolution. Those types of situations can truly be some of the most difficult and exhausting that we face, but if we will remember that it is simply our duty to seek peace and to do our part to be part of the solution and not the problem, then we are doing our part and the Lord will be pleased with those who seek to be peacemakers. May God be with us all and bless us to face conflict with peace as the goal and godliness as our approach .

**\*PRAYER\*** *"Our great Father in heaven. We approach you humbly at this time asking that you help us to be a people who are at peace with all men. We recognize that conflict is often present in our lives for a variety of reasons, but we pray that you help each of us to be individuals who are willing to approach conflict with a heart of resolution. Help us to humble ourselves to be patient with others and hope for peace with all. Help us to avoid slander, gossip, or anything else that might cause greater issues among Your people. Strengthen us have a heart like Your Son who was the ultimate Peacemaker, and may it all be done to your glory and not our own. In Jesus's name we pray, amen.*