

God's Love in Conflict

1. Certainty of Conflict

- We've been considering this term what it means to put God's love into action
 - That is ... trying to flesh out what it looks like to fulfil Jesus' command to love one another as I have loved you
- And you could say that the things we've looked at so far are mostly positive aspects of loving one another
 - Using our gifts to love and build up one another
 - Speaking the gospel into each other's lives
 - Listening to one another
 - Caring for one another in mutual love relationships
- However there's another aspect of loving one another that we must do if we're going to live to be disciples of Jesus
 - That's being willing and learning to love each other in conflict
- The reason this is so essential is because ... this side of heaven no one is perfect
- Whether you're Christian or not ... we all have our
 - Idiosyncrasies
 - Annoying ways
 - Unhelpful habits
 - Ungodly characteristics
 - Sinful desires
- What that means is ...
 - when you bring a bunch of people together ...
 - EVEN WHEN ... all those people are seeking to put God's love into action
 - There will still be times when
 - we get it wrong
 - we hurt and offend each other
 - we sin against each other and
 - we fail to love each other like we should
- And so if you have a bunch of imperfect people coming together to form a church ... it means there is no such thing as the perfect church
 - You might have heard the saying ...

- *'If you ever find a perfect church, don't join it ... because it won't be perfect anymore'*
- Yet the Bible calls disciples of Jesus to be
 - reconciled to one another
 - in fellowship with one another
 - united together in Christ
 - a body that works together to build up and encourage one another
- And so if there's this ideal that God's people are called to
 - And yet our sinfulness means we're unable to consistently live this out...
 - What this means is there will always be this tension that will exist in any church of
 - Oscillating between reconciled and broken relationships
- Which means ... every church, and therefore every disciple of Christ, needs to develop, grow in and work on ... having a culture whereby they're willing to love one another ... even in conflict
 - Because what happens if you don't resolve conflict in a godly, loving way?
 - You have so much built up tension and unresolved conflict that the church crumbles and ceases to function and exist
- **Illustration – Dented Circle**
- Image the church is like a circle
 - Every time there is conflict ... the relationships involved, and therefore the church are dented
 - Unless tension, conflict and sin is resolved and overcome ... what happens is the circle keeps being dented in further and further and further
 - Until eventually, like a black hole ... there is nothing left ... and the whole thing just explodes
- Therefore, it's crucial ... we need to be able to do conflict and resolution well if we're going to be a church that displays God's love in action
- If we don't ... we'll crush each other ... so much so that people will leave and the church will collapse

2. Coping with Conflict

- So ... how do we go about coping with conflict when it arises?

- God gives us lots of wisdom on this

- It depends on how significant the issue is
- If it's a small issue – the wisest thing to do is just to let it go
 - Col 3:13 – bear with one another
 - Rom 12:16 – live in harmony with one another
 - 1 Thess 5:14 – be patient with everyone

- In other words, ... recognise
 - no one is perfect
 - there will be lots of things that people do that will annoy us
 - there will be occasional glitches in a person's character or behaviour

- And therefore, at times ... it's just better to
 - show grace,
 - show some understanding ...
 - and just let it go through to the keeper and not say anything

- **Application**
- Now what this means ... if you're going to let it go
 - Then you really do have to let it go
 - It means being committed to
 - Not dwelling on it
 - Not whinging to others about it
 - Because what's the temptation here?
 - Hold a grudge
 - Remain resentful towards them
 - Gossip about them
 - That's not bearing with one another or being patient with them

- But if it's a bigger issue
 - If it's something that causes a breakdown in relationship
 - If it's something that means you're unable to be in fellowship with them
 - If it's something that undermines your unity with them in Christ
 - then you
 - need to deal with it
 - need to mend the dent in the ball

- How do you do that?
- Jesus shows us how in Matt 18

- ¹⁵ *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.*
- Jesus says ...
 - Go and speak to them about it
 - Be open, be honest ... speak the truth in love
 - "Hey you know when ... I didn't feel very respected"
 - "Hey you know when ... I felt really embarrassed"
 - "Hey you know when ... that was really upsetting"
- Of course ... the aim in all this is **reconciliation**
- As Jesus says in v15
 - *"If he listens to you ... you have won your brother over"*
- Listening implies ... they not just hear what you have to say ... but take on board what you have to say
- That is ... they hear, they understand, they respond ... and the relationship is restored
- This should be as far as it goes for most points of conflict and tension
- And if you and I could just do this well ... the difference would be profound
- **Example - Stu**
 - A number of years ago when I was a student minister ... I was full of pride and arrogance ... thought I knew better than the minister I was working under
 - And this showed in the way I spoke to and treated him
 - And he was gracious and patient with me for a time
 - But it got the point where it was affecting our friendship and ability to do ministry together
 - So he did exactly what Jesus spells out here in v15
 - He came to me ... spoke to me about the things I had been doing and saying and the negative impact that was having
 - I was cut to heart and able to apologise, seek forgiveness and our friendship and fellowship was restored
- But what happens if you go to someone, seeking reconciliation ... and it doesn't go well?
 - v16 - ¹⁶ *But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'*

- Jesus' principle here is two-fold
- Firstly,
 - By taking 1 or 2 others along ... it immediately says to the other person
 - this is serious
 - there are others who are aware of this and want it resolved
 - having others there will help to guard against it escalating
 - make the other person think twice about responding in ungodly way
 - God willing, the person realises the seriousness of the situation and importance of reconciling ... and is repentance and forgiveness results
- Second principle of having others there is
 - If the person still refuses to listen ...
 - If they are defensive, deny wrong doing, unwilling to work towards reconciliation ... then there are others who can back up the person who has been hurt
- For example
 - Col has been physically intimidating Mark Phillips!
 - [Col the LEAST likely guy in church to physically intimidate anyone]
 - Mark & Col not able to resolve in the first instance
 - Mark asks Steve to help
 - Steve's in the same GG as Col and Mark
 - He's respected by both of them > mature > godly > wise
 - Steve goes along and help them work things out
 - With Steve there ... Col
 - comes to his senses,
 - realises he's got anger issues 😊,
 - reconciles with Mark and
 - Is convinced by Steve to go to anger mgmt. classes 😊
- If that still doesn't work, then the final step is then to take it to the church
 - v17 – *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*
- In other words ...
 - escalate it > take it to those in authority over the church
 - help the person to see the gravity of the situation
- And in doing so ... you're allowing the church leadership
 - to speak into the situation ...
 - speak the gospel into the situation and their life

- This will be different for different churches
 - Here at C@P it means bringing it to me and wardens or parish council
- As you follow this process of dealing with conflict ... let me give you three quick principles to follow:
- Firstly ... do it gently
 - *Galatians 6:1 – Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently*
- Secondly, remember the goal is restoration > both of them as individuals and also of your relationship
 - *2 Timothy 2:25-26 ²⁵ Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.*
- Thirdly, do so humbly remembering, that you too are a sinner
 - *Matthew 7:5 first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.*
- This is the biblical way for dealing with conflict
- But because so many of us don't like conflict ... and we don't like the awkwardness of having an honest and challenging conversation ... this doesn't always happen does it?!
- What do we tend to do instead?
 - One way is we **gossip**
 - We're not prepared to speak to the person who's hurt or offended us ... but we vent our hurt and frustration by speaking to others
 - Another way we deal with it is to **triangulate**
 - That is we tell someone else who we think has influence over the person ... a spouse, parent, friend or leader ... in the hope that that person will say something to them
 - Example – *'Stu ... I don't know if you are aware ... but Bob has been putting the toilet roll on the wrong way ... and a lot of people are unhappy with it (code for – there's two people who are unhappy – me and the other person I gossiped with). I just thought I would let you know ... so you can have a word to them'*

- Another thing we do is **avoid them**
- We'll not talk to them > not engage with them > just steer of them

- **Leave**
 - Sadly, others will just leave the church
 - They're so hurt, but at the same time so unwilling to speak directly to the person, the way they deal with it is to leave

- Neither of those options are good ways to cope with conflict
 - They're not loving > not honest > not godly
 - Undermine God's purpose for his people to be united, reconciled to one another and in fellowship with one another
 - You can't be that if you are unwilling to resolve conflict with each other

- Part of living to be disciples of Jesus, means being willing to speak honestly to each other about things that have fractured your unity and fellowship with others

- God has reconciled himself to us in Christ ... and he calls on, and expects his people to be reconciled to each other

3. Challenges of Conflict

- For reconciliation to happen you need two things
 - Repentance
 - Forgiveness
- And that comes out in our reading from Matthew 18

- **Repentance**
- **Matthew 18:15** ¹⁵ *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. **If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.***
- The implication by Jesus here is ... if someone speaks to us about how we have sinned against them ... then the best thing we can do ... the right thing we ought to do ... is to listens to them
- And as always in the Bible ... to listen means to respond rightly or obey
 - Not just hear, nod and ignore
 - Not just hear, shake your head and justify and defend
- No ... hear and respond rightly

- How do we respond rightly when confronted with our sin?

- Confess our sin and repent of it
- That is ...
 - we acknowledge the part we played to hurt, frustrate or embarrass the other person; and
 - we resolve to do differently
- **1 John 1:8-9** ⁸ *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.* ⁹ *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*
- These verses are talking about our need to be honest with God about our sinfulness and need to confess and repent
- But same is true in our relationships with each other
 - We need to be honest about ourselves and our sinful nature, recognising
 - We're not beyond reproach
 - We're not pure in heart
 - We're unable to live perfect lives
- **Application**
- When it is clear we have wronged another person, it's important that we confess and repent honestly and completely
 - Not half-heartedly or insincerely
- One way to do this is to use the "Seven A's of Apology and Confession:"
 - Address everyone involved
 - Avoid if, but, and maybe (don't make excuses)
 - Admit specifically (both attitudes and actions)
 - Apologize (express sorrow for the way you affected someone)
 - Accept the consequences
 - Alter your behaviour (commit to changing harmful habits)
 - Ask for forgiveness
- Do that ... and you will have shown your brother or sister you love them and want to be reconciled to them

Forgiveness

- The second thing that's essential to challenging conflict is forgiveness
- If you've been hurt, embarrassed or let down by someone's words or actions ... then it can be very hard to forgive
- This challenge to forgive others is what's on Peter's mind in v22 when he asks

- *"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"*
- The Rabbi's of the day used to teach that you ought to forgive a person 3 times
 - So Peter thinks he's being really generous here > more than doubling the times you ought to forgive a person
- But Jesus blows Peter's understanding of forgiveness out of the water
 - ²² *Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."*
- What! Are you serious Jesus! 77 times!
 - Now Jesus isn't being literal here
 - He's using hyperbole
 - His point is ... there is no limit to forgiveness
 - Whenever your brother or sister sins against you and genuinely repents, Jesus us saying ... forgive them
 - There's no place for holding back forgiveness for someone who sincerely repents
- Jesus knew this would be hard for them to hear and accept
 - They'd be thinking in their hearts ...
 - "No way ... this is crazy ... Jesus has gone too far with this one ... he's lost it completely this time"
- So Jesus tells his disciples this parable about the unforgiving servant
 - Jesus likens us to the first servant in v24 who is called in by the King who wants to settler his accounts
 - The servant owes 10,000 talents > equivalent of about \$18bn dollars
 - James Packer is worth \$4bn
 - Means he owes 4 times the net worth one of the richest men in Australia!!
- See in v25 the servant was unable to pay such a massive debt ... and so his whole family was ordered to be sold into slavery
- However ... selling the man and his family into slavery was never going to be able to clear such a massive debt
 - Like us promising to give over all our pay for the next 40 years of our life to clear an \$18bn debt
 - It's never going to happen!

- And so we see the desperate plight this man is in
 - He and his family would have spent their entire lives in slavery
 - The man was never going to be able to pay off the debt
 - And so in v26 he begs for mercy
- Surprisingly ... the king took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go
 - It's surprising because to do so meant the king has to incur an \$18bn loss in order to pardon the man
 - That's a massive cost to the king in order to forgive a servant
- Jesus wants us to see that we are like the first servant being called to account
 - The image is of us standing before King Jesus on the Day of Judgment
 - And my sin means I have a debt with God that can never ever be repaid
 - And yet in his mercy he forgives us that \$18bn debt
- And the point Jesus is making to the disciples who are shocked at the idea that they ought to forgive without limit ...
 - Is that the reason they ought to forgive like this ... is because they are like the first servant who has been forgiven so much more before God
- **Application**
- We baulk at this idea about forgiving without limit
- We say to ourselves ...
- I can't forgive ...
 - he's hurt me and rejected me
 - she's caused me so much suffering
- And that's exactly Jesus point in the parable
- For you and I have
 - Hurt and rejected God
 - Caused him great suffering
- And yet he does forgive
 - And he doesn't limit his forgiveness towards you
 - Even though it cost him many times more you than you or could imagine or bear
- **Illustration: Corrie ten Boom**
- Corrie ten Boom lived in Netherlands during WWII

- Famous for protecting and smuggling Jews out of the country and away from SS
- The Germans arrested her entire family where they were eventually sent to the notorious Ravensbrück concentration camp in Germany
- On arrival at Ravensbrück the women were marched to the processing centre for new arrivals
- There they had to pile all of their belongings in the centre of the room and then strip naked and also add their clothes to the pile
- Naked they had to walk under bright lights and past the scrutiny of a dozen guards towards the shower room
- Corrie's sister Betsy died at Ravensbrück ... but miraculously one day due a clerical error ... Corrie was released from prison

- Two years later in 1947, she was living in Germany as a teacher ...
 - "It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former SS man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing centre at Ravensbrück."
 - "He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsy's pain blanched face"
 - "He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. *"How grateful I am for your message Fräulein", he said "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!"*
 - "His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often on the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side."
 - "Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him."
 - "For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then."

- Corrie ten Boom ... knowing the debt she had been forgiven by Jesus ... enabled her to forgive the debt this guard owed her

- **Application**
- Friends, if you are finding it hard to forgive
 - Then look to Jesus and see how much more he has forgiven you
 - Knowing the one who has forgiven you without limit ... will enable you to forgive ... even when it is hard and it hurts

4. Conclusion

- We need to remember church is like a hospital waiting room
 - We're all broken and sick and need fixing
 - And therefore we can be certain that conflict will happen

- Resolving conflict is never easy
- But its critical we are willing to repent and forgive one another ... if we're to remain reconciled to one another

- As you and I
 - confess our sins and repent to one another
 - forgive one another knowing we have been forgiven so much more in Christ
 - our relationships will be reconciled
 - our unity and fellowship retained
 - and like the ball ...
 - C@P won't get smaller and smaller and implode ...
 - rather it will expand and strengthen and grow
 - to be a community, albeit it an imperfect community, ... that loves one another as Christ loved us

PRAY