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# In the Midst of 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.

The trouble in Philippi:

A dear and valuable partnership

A troubling and difficult conflict

A division between two people threatening to engulf the whole church

A plea for real unity in ministry diversity.

Transferring principles:

Primary context of ministry

Wide application across all spheres of *Christian* relationships

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?

## **Responsibility to Help People in Conflict (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.

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

<sup>2</sup> I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. <sup>3</sup> 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.

## **In Loving Relationships (v.1)**

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. The strong words and hard counsel are expressions of his deep love for them. Parents who love their children will chasten them when needed. Chastening correction is one of the deep ways we know and experience God's Fatherly love for us. So 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. Why does he use this language? Why are these beloved people to stay in formation? We are cued by the word "thus" to look at the end of the chapter 3.

<sup>17</sup> Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. <sup>18</sup> For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

They are standing firm in formation with godly leaders who have set them an example. Paul and those serving with him stood as an example of standing firm in the midst of the fire fight for truth and the kingdom.

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. Know who your fellow citizens and soldiers are. Know whom you are to stand firm with in the battle against the enemies of God and the gospel.

**With Patient Appeals****(v.2)**

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. For as long as the Word of God stands, we know the names of these two ladies. He has singled them out as the source of the conflict. The strong correction he gave in chapters 1 – 2 now are focused directly on two people, probably sitting on opposite sides of the room.

He is not satisfied with mere external accord, but calls for internal harmony. They need, each of them, to have the same mindset. In other words, both need to align their heart beliefs and wants with Jesus' in Philippians 2 and with Paul's in Philippians 3.

He appeals to the sources of conflict to realign their thinking with Christ. Note that he is not calling for them to necessarily agree with each other though that may be the ultimate outcome. What they desperately need is what Philippians 2:2-5 pleads for

<sup>2</sup> [C]omplete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus... (ESV).

**By Faithful Helpers****(v.3)**

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. Not wanting to read too much into this, we may well see the fracture between these ladies spreading and causing dissent and division where Clement and others were being treated as enemies of the gospel.

**Within Greater Unity****(v.3)**

This last phrase reminds us that our partnership serves within a greater unity. Clearly we are being connected to 3:17-21. All of these folks are to serve together without grumbling and complaining, even when there are differences, because they are holding forth the light of gospel (Philippians 2:14-18).

From this I see four striking principles for facilitating conflict resolution:

1. Build loving relationships as the broad context for conflict resolution. Doing the hard stuff required will be better borne when assurances of love accompany it.
2. Point to the heart from which conflict is arising. Examine yourself or help others to see how their attitudes, thinking, mindsets are not aligned with Christ.
3. Conflict resolution is almost always mediated by trusted people. Their aim is help people to change their hearts to be like Christ and willing to serve with the saints.
4. Conflict resolution requires a commitment to mortification of self and willingness to serve so that the partnership in the gospel is a reflection of membership in the kingdom.

### **What is to Characterize People in Conflict (v.4-7)**

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

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

### **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.

### **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 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.

**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 his 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.

Often, great strivings of selfish hearts are the roots of conflict, disagreement and division. Our wants are whip wielding masters. Our preferences, pride, position, preeminence seem to be under assault. What we hold dear is being taken away. In those moments when our tendency is to turn our swords and shields to attack our fellow soldiers, it is then that we must lift our requests to the Lord. He is at hand. He is near. He may well be as near as the brother or sister we are in conflict with.

In the midst of conflict, when worries and anxieties rise, speak to God about your requests with a heart full of gratitude.

**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.

**How to Respond when in Conflict****(v.8-9)**

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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. Alongside of us will be the God of peace 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 and self-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. Conflict tends to provoke us and to tempt us into sinful thoughts while God is pleased when we bring out thought life into captivity and discipline ourselves to be careful what we are thinking about. Further, your talk to others will be an evident symptom of the talk to your-

self. Your inner heart words will simply overflow into sinful talk to others or about others.

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?

Finally, all that follows does not preclude 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	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	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	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	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

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 rehearsing 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

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

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

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.

## In Whom We Follow

(v.9)

So, who do you strive to be like in the midst of conflict? Does Arnold in *The Terminator* work for you? 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<sup>v</sup> and the God of peace will be face-to-face among the believing community.

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## Reflect and Respond

How is such as this possible? Because we have learned Philippians 2:1-18

<sup>1</sup> So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

<sup>14</sup> Do all things without grumbling or questioning, <sup>15</sup> that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, <sup>16</sup> holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. <sup>17</sup> Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.

<sup>18</sup> Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

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.

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## Notes

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<sup>v</sup> The plural pronoun is accompanied by plural nouns indicating individuals. The plural *you* alone within or at the end of sentences not used as a possessive tends to indicate corporate, community.