

## Formed by Jesus: Conflict Management

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

January 28, 2024 AM Sermon

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Matthew 18-15-19

When I do pre-marital counseling, like a lot of pastors, I always do a section on conflict. I always do a section where I say, “OK, let’s talk about how you disagree.” It always ends up being one of the best parts of the counseling. Because every couple disagrees. Every relationship has conflict, and pretty early on, couples realize that their ability to handle conflict is critical to surviving in their relationship.

What we say is that every couple has to build a conflict machine. In a relationship two people come together and each of them have a distinct way that they act in conflict. They each have a conflict style. Some people are loud and emotional in conflict. Some people are calm and rational, but stubborn. Some people hate conflict and try to pretend it doesn’t exist. Healthy couples take their conflict styles and fit them together in a way that works. They understand how they behave in conflict and make the necessary adjustments together so that when a disagreement arises, they can process that disagreement in a healthy, productive way. If their conflict machine is working well, a couple can put a big conflict into the machine and process it together. If a couple’s conflict machine isn’t working well, you can put even the smallest disagreement into the machine and end up with an explosion.

Conflict is a part of every marriage; conflict is part of every church too. And in our passage today you might say that Jesus is helping us build a conflict machine for the church. Jesus is teaching churches how to deal with conflict. Because conflicts will come to churches, and just like with couples, if our conflict machine is working well, we’ll be OK. If our conflict machine isn’t working so well, even small conflicts will make us go ‘kablooie.’

It’s interesting: just like people in relationships, churches can vary widely in their conflict styles. Some churches are very open and direct with conflict; some are conflict avoidant. Over the last 70 years of the Christian Reformed Church, our denomination, has changed its conflict style. We used to be very direct in conflict and in discipline. For example, if a young couple got pregnant while they were dating, sometimes the couple was called in front of the church and forced to confess their sins in front of everyone. The discipline, the conflict was right out front. People got censured. People got excluded from communion. People got excommunicated. More recently though, it’s been very different. We don’t make young couples come forward to confess their sins, and I think that’s a good thing. Do you know how many censures or excommunications I’ve been a part of in my 30 years in ministry? Zero. In fact, when I first got to LaGrave, for the first 5 years I was in council it’s hard to think of a vote on any subject where there was even one dissenting vote. We were conflict avoidant.

Too much conflict is bad in a marriage and bad in churches. Conflict avoidance is bad in a marriage and bad in churches. Both extremes have problems and that’s why the Bible has passages that warn against both extremes. The Bible has passages that push us towards conflict and passages that warn us about conflict. Our passage this morning pushes us towards conflict. If your brother or sister sins, if something arises between you, don’t ignore it, don’t let it slide, don’t pretend everything is OK, go to them and talk to them. Earlier, in the sermon on the mount, Jesus says something similar: “If you are offering your gift at the altar and you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar and go and first be reconciled to them.” Don’t be conflict avoidant! Don’t let sin fester! Deal with the stuff!

But lest we become a community of nitpickers and finger pointers, you have other texts. Texts like Matthew 5:39 where Jesus says, “if someone slaps you on one cheek turn to him the other cheek also.” If you’re eager to confront, that text wants to slow you down. So does Matthew 7 where Jesus says, “Judge not, lest you be judged! Take the plank out of your own eye before you tell your sister about her speck!” So you have these two different sorts of texts and they don’t contradict each other, they help us keep our moral life in proper tension. They help us avoid the unhealthy extremes of an avoidance which just lets sin fester, and a nitpicking which causes a community to, in the words of Paul in Galatians 5:15, “bite and devour each other” until you destroy each other.

Conflict is complicated and handling it well is so important. Healthy people, healthy relationships and healthy churches need to be able to do conflict. A healthy church needs a conflict machine. A healthy church needs to have a process where sins that hurt others and damage relationships or destroy trust are addressed. In that sense, a community without discipline is like a body without a liver. A liver is not the most celebrated organ of the body, but it's essential because it removes toxins from the blood. It keeps the blood pure. If your liver isn't functioning your body fills with toxins and you die. In the same way, a church which refuses to deal with sin and unhealthy dynamics, a church community which fails to filter the toxins will die.

So having said all that, what kind of conflict machine is Jesus building here? How does a healthy church community approach discipline? I would like to say three things. First, in a church a good conflict machine must be built on strong, loving relationships. A church that does conflict well has strong relationships and mutual love. Without love, that foundational moral principle on which everything else hangs, any attempt to do church conflict will do more harm than good. If you try to do the three steps Jesus describes here without love, it will make things worse instead of better. You can tell that love is the foundation for what Jesus is describing when Jesus uses the word "brother." "If your brother or sister sins against you." Jesus assumes this confrontation is happening between close family members who love each other. Love comes before the conflict.

A congregation with weak community life will never be good at discipline. A community with deep love and deep commitment to each other will have the best chance at healthy conflict. Again, marriage is an analogy. People who are married have better conditions for building a good conflict machine than people who are just living together. When you are married, when you've made vows to stay with the other person for better or worse as long as you both shall live, you have built a foundation of deep commitment and so you can be honest with the other person and not worry that they will abandon you if they don't like what you say. The foundation of complete commitment gives you the stability to handle the conflict. If you're just living together, the commitment isn't the same. The vows aren't there. The foundation is weaker. You will be more likely to avoid conflict because you aren't sure if the relationship can survive your honesty. (I know I'm pushing against the cultural winds here, but this is why the church continues to say that living together before marriage is a bad idea.)

In a congregation, you can see how this plays out. I've seen three different levels. I've seen church community where confrontation works well because people really love each other and they confront because they have the other person's best interest at heart and everyone wants to stay connected. I've seen communities that are conflict adverse because the community ties are less certain. People don't want to confront each other because they think the person will just leave if they speak up. At least in this case they care enough about the other person to have them around. The worst-case scenario is when you are perfectly happy to confront the other person because you don't care about them at all, and you kind of hope they'll leave. If a church descends into that kind of discipline, it's in a bad place. Strong love and good community are the essential foundation to a healthy conflict machine.

Second, a good church conflict machine runs on face to face conflict: "Go to them and point out their sin." Go to them. Jesus didn't live in the time of email, or phones, or texts or social media. If he did, I feel quite sure he wouldn't have said, if your brother sins text them and tell them their sin, or email them and let them know the error of their ways.

The 'face to face' is important here. It's too easy to confront people virtually. It's too painless. You've heard of cheap grace, emailed confrontation is cheap confrontation. If there is any way, if there is any means, if it is at all possible, if you are feeling a strong enough sense of things that you think a brother or sister needs to be confronted, you should go to them. Look them in the eye and tell them your concern. You should do it with love, we talked about that. You should do it with gentleness, because that's what Paul says in Galatians 6:1 – "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently."

It's interesting, our culture has become more conflicted over the last ten years now that the smart phone is everywhere. It's so easy to confront someone these days. It's really easy to give someone a piece of your mind. You can email, you can text or tweet. You can zing them in the comment section. Again: it's cheap confrontation. I wonder if the rise of these impersonal means of communication have caused a rise in toxic conflict and destructive disagreement. Godly confrontation is built on the foundation of love, and, if at all possible, it happens face to face.

Third, and this is really important, in a healthy conflict machine, all the participants in the conflict machine have the right perspective on themselves. In a healthy church conflict machine, all the people see themselves in the right way. What way is that? Well, look at the parable that follows right after ours, the parable of the unmerciful servant. That's a parable about confrontation too, but it's an example of confrontation gone wrong and it goes wrong because the man doesn't see himself in the right way.

A man owed his king an unpayable debt. Hundreds of millions of dollars. He can't repay this debt and so he is facing slavery for himself and his family. He falls on his knees before the king begging for mercy. The merciful king forgives this enormous debt. Amazing grace. But as he leaves the palace, the forgiven servant runs into a fellow servant who owes him money. A couple of thousand dollars. He confronts the man. How does he confront? He grabs the man by the neck and demands payment. The man falls to his knees and begs for mercy, but the servant has him thrown in jail. The king hears what the servant did. He is furious. He puts the unmerciful servant in jail for the rest of his life.

What does the unmerciful servant get wrong in this confrontation? He doesn't see himself properly. He sees himself as a righteous person who has suffered a terrible grievance, and in front of him is a terrible sinner. He draws an absolute distinction between himself and the person he confronts. He's the good guy; they're the bad guy. How should the servant see himself? He should see himself the same as the person he's confronting. They are both flawed sinners saved by grace. He should have a sense of his brokenness and the grace he has received. Knowledge of those things shouldn't make him avoid the confrontation completely, but it would totally change the spirit of that confrontation.

If we go into our conflicts as the right thinking defenders of goodness and think of the person we're confronting as a wayward threat to truth and decency, we will do conflict wrong. The machine will run way too hot. Besides, we are not the right thinking defenders of goodness, we are people who had an unpayable debt. We are all people who were crushed under the weight of an unpayable debt of sin, and Jesus came, and he paid that debt. He put himself under the weight of that debt and let it crush him, so that we could be free.

That's how Jesus did confrontation. He came to us in love; it was the Father's unwavering commitment not to give up on the world and it's people that caused him to send his Son. He came to us face to face; he called us to repent and he pointed out our sins but he did it in person. He came to us and, when he had every right to crush us, every right to condemn us and cast us away, he laid down his life for us. That's how Jesus confronted us. That's how Jesus did confrontation. So as we confront and as we discipline (as we must), may the grace and power of that holy confrontation inform everything we do.

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