

Handling conflict at work (Matthew 18:15-17; 5:23-25; 1 Peter 2:11-12)

Purpose statement

Jesus calls you to seek peace with those you find yourself in conflict with, so God can be glorified and magnified by your humility.

Introduction

Self-introduction and prayer

In the previous sermons we introduced the topic of conflict and saw that conflict is normal between two people or groups of people. In James 4:1-12, the diagnosis of why conflict happens was traced back to the desires and motives in our hearts. The focus was on the internal causes – what we want pushing us to demand it from others leading to conflict. Today we will add another dimension; conflict from an external source – when we are sinned against by others. We will read three different texts to learn how to resolve conflict in everyday life events. We will particularly focus on conflict in the work place.

Many years ago after I graduated as a high school teacher I had serious conflicts with the principal of the school I was deployed to teach. The bone of contention was that the principal refused to give me the subject I had been trained to teach but was eager to give me other subjects I barely could teach. To me this defied logic. My zeal and desire as a new teacher was to be able to give my classes the best from my training. Up to now I can't figure out what the principal's desires was for wanting me to teach what I was not confident in. What I know is that the conflicts were nasty and did not only make my work difficult but also poisoned the work environment. What I also know is that in the moments of anger and frustration I would say and do things that I would later regret. Many of us who are employed will have a lot of such frustrating stories to tell about their workplaces.

It is important for me to point out that the texts from Matthew directly address conflict situations in a church situation. They are about handling conflict among believers. We will look at these biblical principles to apply them to managing conflict in at the work place. It could be conflict involving believers and non-believers in a work situation or any other people. The starting point is to appreciate that as long as we live in the flesh life will always remind us that no human is perfect. All of us will always make mistakes and those mistakes may not always be taken well by others. The texts we are going look at in Matthew address sinning against others. Particularly they are addressing what one ought to do when someone wrongs them. That is how to go about resolving the conflict.

My personal responsibilities in a conflict (Mtt 5:23-25; 18:15)

Leading to studying the texts the question I have for you is, if you have a conflict with someone where to you run to? Some run to their lawyers, some to their sangoma some to a brother who has a gun and believers may run to God. But Jesus has an interesting approach in Mtt 5:23-25. *“Run to the person you are in conflict with first”*. The believer is kneeling before God to pray, but Jesus says, wait a minute. Before you bring your prayer to God, remember you have an unresolved matter between you and a fellow human being. It's like he is saying the unresolved conflict stands as a stumbling block between you and God. Your relationships with other human beings matter before God. Be the leader in making peace with your brother, so that when you pray, you pray with a clear conscience.

In the context of Matt 5:23-25 this pulling back to self-examine before prayer is important because someone is actually accusing you for wronging them. He says as the accused person, your seeking peace with them is to your advantage. You will be wiser if you take the initiative to engage the other person before the matter is judged by other people. In Mtt 18:15, it is the opposite, someone has wronged you, yet in both cases Jesus' instruction is that you personally confront the person. Mtt 18:15 particularly points out that the purpose of approaching them is for you to possibly win them over. This means you can make them realise their fault and if they take it well then relationships may be smoothed. Notice that Jesus is aware that it can go in two ways. Either you win them over or you fail.

In Mtt 5:23-25 Jesus emphasizes the point of resolving conflicts quickly. This is important because the more the matter remains unresolved, the more we become angry, bitter and frustrated. In the sermon on the mount that Jesus preached before this text, he has already pointed out that whoever harbours anger against their brother or sister is as guilty as a murderer is (Mtt 5:21-22). I can hear an objection here. “How can I be accused of anger when I am the one who has been wronged. Don't I have the right to be angry. That's how God sees our anger, regardless of its source, it is not healthy for us nor for the other person.

“In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷and do not give the devil a foothold (Ephesians 4:26-27).

Jesus' point in both Mtt 5:23-25 and Mtt 18:15 is that conflict needs to be resolved quickly before it grows into anger and bitterness. The first step which is very crucial is a face to face conversation with the person you are in conflict with especially if confronting them does not expose you to physical danger. This also helps to contain the conflict and possibly prevent it from spilling into the public domain like the social media. The social media just serves to invite the whole world to be judge over a matter they don't even know what is really obtaining between the two people in conflict. By approaching the person who aggrieved you, you might help them understand how you feel and they might see their fault and make amends. Self-introspection could also help you realise your own contribution to the problem. If you are a believer, you might consider asking God to

expose your own sinfulness in the matter at hand rather than asking God to deal with the other person. Owning your own part of the problem needs humility and sincerity before God. If your accuser is unrepentant, as a child of God you may ask God to give you the strength to forgive your accuser and leave vengeance to God.

Get help (Mtt 18:16-17)

The Lord Jesus takes it a step further. If the matter remains unresolved between the two of you then you need to get help. We don't live in isolation. God created us to live in community and be there for each other. If the person who has wronged you is unwilling to listen to your plea for peace, Jesus says you need to take up the matter with other trusted people within your circles. If it is a family dispute you might approach trusted family members for mediation. If it is a situation at work, you might approach trusted colleagues especially in the leadership to help with arbitration. If it is a situation at church you might approach the elders of the church for mediation. This stage if handled properly helps to build up trust and healthy relationships against punishment and revenge. Some people immediately want to get their matters to the courts. Courts are more legalistic than relational in their approach. Instead of healing relationships they might be more punishing. This is why Jesus encourages personal reconciliation to bring about a win-win situation than a punishing and vindictive outcome.

Jesus knows the heart of men very well. He knows that sometimes our hearts are hardened and we prefer to stick to our guns even if we are wrong. He knows that a heart that is unresponsive to the Spirit of God might not care how others feel preferring war instead of peace. He knows that even the best mediation sometimes fails and offenders remain unrepentant. In the case of the church family he says if such a person refuses to listen to the counsel of brothers and sisters in privacy, let the whole church know about their unrepentant stance. While in today's human rights movements some may see this as unfair exposure, Jesus is teaching the principle of accountability and community's responsibility towards its members.

For the community to function in a healthy way, members of the community have to keep each other accountable. If such a believer still remains unrepentant, Jesus says the church family should simply cut off fellowship with them. This is very clear, a member's bad and sinful behaviour does not only tarnish their own image but the image of the church. In the business world, the company may also take the decision to dismiss the person if their behaviour brings their company into disrepute. In this way both the aggrieved individual and the company are protected.

The steps that Jesus prescribes for conflict resolution are in essence a demonstration of loving patience that gives the other person a chance. This helps us to avoid impulsive decisions taken out of anger. Jesus calls for love that serves others regardless of their actions. It is a call to love your neighbour as you love yourself (Matt 22:39). It is a call for believers to be reconcilers and peacemakers through the love of God. This is radical love

that teaches us to love even those that are against us. Such love only comes through the righteousness that only comes from God. It is only the power of Christ that can make it possible for anger and hate to be transformed to forgiveness.

Confront Conflict with a cross-shaped life (1 Peter 2:11-12)

As Christians the reconciliation we had with God in the death and resurrection of Christ should shape how we respond to conflict. As children of God we are called to be peacemakers. *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God”* (Mtt 5:9). Conflicts should also be an opportunity to glorify God, first by getting rid of the log in our own eye. Once we have seen how we also contribute to the conflict, taken it to God in repentance we can move forward to reaching out to those against us.

Jesus teaches a radical way of peacemaking, *“loving your enemy”*. This is hard in our natural state, it needs the power of the Holy Spirit for us to be able to pray for those that persecute us. Jesus calls us to love them, bless them and pray for them. Jesus calls this *“Carrying our own cross”* i.e following in his steps forgoing his divine position in heaven to die the death of a criminal to serve those who persecuted him. We too in conflict we should sacrifice to forgo our own desires and comforts to accommodate others. We should be prepared to forgo our right so God can be glorified and not men. It may mean saying No! to worldly prestige, honour and status and let others have their way . By giving up our wants, our own way for others, we are living according to the principles of God’s glorious kingdom. We may not get what our heart desires; that promotion that we need so much to be able to afford our dream home but trust in God who knows beyond today. This is only possible in Christ, who alone can make it possible for our anger and hate to be transformed to love and forgiveness.

Once we are free from hate, anger and bitterness, we can now live and experience true love and live lives that are so radically different that even those against us can glorify God. This is how Peter encourages the new Christians living under a world hostile to Christianity in Asia Minor (1Pt 2:11-12). He encourages them to respond in a way that shows their loyalty to God. It is important to know that the more we become loyal to God, the more we feel like strangers in our own families, at work and even at church.

Peter wants his listeners firstly to be inward-looking. He wants their identity to be in Christ and their loyalty due only to him. He says their pursuits and desires should not revolve around the pleasures of this world (We saw this in the first sermon that helped us to understand the source of conflict). He wants them to be aware that a life that is focused on the desires of this world may put them on a collision course with others. He then calls them to abstain (stay away from such desires). This is possible if they stay in Christ.

Secondly, Peter calls them to maintain good behaviour in the midst of hostility. He says this is important because their good behaviour might lead some to put faith in Jesus. He says they should however delight not just in suffering but in suffering for good reasons

(1Pt 3:17). Like Jesus who suffered unjustly to earn our salvation, Peter says our suffering might make those who see it glorify God. He is teaching us the kingdom principle of responding to hostility with good deeds (v12). He wants our good deeds to have a missional impact.

Let me pray

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Reflection Questions

1. Have you found it challenging to admit your own faults in a conflict. If so what makes it difficult?
2. Are you presently involved in a conflict, small or big? Are there any people within your circle of relationships you can trust to mediate in a conflict you are having? If not make an effort to find them and share your problem with them.
3. What principles have you learnt in the sermon that could help you when you face the next conflict situation.