

As a kid I loved trading shots with anyone I could get to play Battleship with me. I had a strategy for taking out my opponents ships before they could find and destroy mine.

The fun thing about a game like Battleship is that we can trade shots with one another and no one gets hurt.

But in the game of life; trading shots is anything but fun. We cast verbal salvos across the bow of others and they in turn unleash a barrage back at us. And over time the conflict heightens bringing in more and more players until our conflict turns into a war.

As we learned last week, words, the artillery that we fire at one another; have the power to hurt another person far worse than sticks and stones. No matter what the song that we learned as kids says: 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,' words can and often do have a far worse impact on us than any sticks or stones.

Conflict is something that all of us have had to deal with in our lives. Whether it was on the playground as a kid, in a relationship with a spouse, or with co-workers; none of us have been able to traverse life without experiencing conflict. Our inability to navigate the waters of conflict has left many people exclaiming, You sunk my battleship!

Even disciples of Jesus experience conflict! And the church, which by the way is full of people, has experienced its share of conflicts among its members. As a matter of fact that has been going on since the early days of the church. And we know about it from the letters of Paul.

As the Apostle Paul planted new churches during his journeys he often followed up with letters to the new church. Many of the letters dealt with specific conflicts that arose among members of those churches.

One of those letters which Paul wrote was to the church in Philippi. As he wrapped up his letter he made a reference to a conflict between two women, Euodia and Syntyche. Now we don't know the nature of the conflict; but that is not the important point. What is important is how Paul intended their actions to model a positive way to not only resolve conflict; but how to deal with their differences in a way that brought unity to the church.

Paul understood that failure to deal with conflict properly, in our relationships and in the church, could have a negative effect on those outside the church. So Paul made certain that he provided the disciples of Jesus a way to resolve conflict and maintain a positive witness to Jesus Christ.

Now before we unpack this passage in Philippians 4 let me take you back to Philippians 1:27 where Paul writes: *Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel.*

In simple terms that means that we live in a way that reflects Jesus love for the world. Our conduct either makes Jesus appear like someone worth getting to know or someone we could live without. Think about this; what has turned many people-especially young people- off to the church is the unbecoming example that the church has displayed at times.

Whether it has been our confrontational and negative style or the back-stabbing and biting and devouring of fellow believers; the church-and many who claim to be Christians-have failed to live in a way that demonstrates the love of God for others.

We are called to live our lives worthy of the Gospel. And the sooner we do that the better able we will be to attract people to Jesus.

Now Paul is going to get specific with his call to live lives worthy of the Gospel by taking on the conflict that he has heard about between two women, Euodia and Syntyche.

Read Philippians 4:1-9

When taken in the context of the whole of Paul's letter to the Philippians; it is as though Paul is saying; the church at Philippi cannot fulfill its purpose of demonstrating and sharing the Good News of the Gospel so long as these two women have unresolved conflict between them.

Sadly, there have been many churches that lost their witness in their communities simply because everyone in that community came to see the church as a place of strife and conflict. And if we have no other reason to learn how to resolve conflict the greatest reason should be because our failure to resolve conflict destroys the unity of the body of Christ and in turn the witness of the church.

So let's take a look at how Paul instructs these two women to conduct themselves and how to resolve conflict. Now if you are like me you've probably never thought of this passage in Philippians as a primer on overcoming conflict; but I'm indebted to Mark Buchanan who shared this thought in a series of sermons on Philippians.

Before we get into specifics; I want you to note that Paul puts the women's conflict in the larger context of the church. It is important to understand that our conflict with another person is rarely a private matter. Conflicts usually spill over into the larger community. And because of that, Paul calls on the church to be a part of ending the conflict and restoring unity. The truth is conflict among a few ultimately hurts us all because it creates a negative environment.

With Euodia and Syntyche's conflict placed in the context of the body of the church; it is incumbent upon the body of Christ to work together for restoration. Paul doesn't call us to take sides, or ignore the conflict; Paul calls us to help those who are at odds with one another because we are coworkers in the mission of Jesus Christ.

Now remember that most of us have read these next few verses as little slogans that sound good on bumper stickers. But rather than seeing them as small thoughts at the end of Paul's letter; look at them in the context of Euodia and Syntyche getting practical counsel about how to resolve conflict.

First Paul says in verse 4: Rejoice in the Lord always. Conflict has a way of stealing our joy. So Paul's admonition is to seek joy always.

Second, Paul says in verse 5: Let your gentleness be evident to all. Let me just unpack these words. Gentleness here is the refusal on our part to act out the anger or retaliation to which you

may be entitled. The word evident actually points not so much to *your* behavior but to the perception of the *other* person. In other words the real measure of your gentleness is not if you think you're being gentle, but if the other person sees it, feels it and experiences it.

So in verse 5 Paul wants your gentleness to be known to others.

In verse 6 Paul gives us the third point. *Let your requests be known to God*. Literally Paul says resolving conflict involves let God know your problems.

There is something about conflict that disconnects our relationship with God. We lose sight of God and all we can see is the other person. So Paul reminds us to not lose focus on God.

I like what Mark Buchanan says here: What in essence Paul is saying is: Let God know your problems, but let others know your peace.

This is maybe the hardest thing Paul says here. It is a feat of superhuman endurance not to vent at another human being when we're in a conflict.

Now, to be clear, Paul is not saying we can never address the situation with another human being. He's just saying we need to do that in a gentle way. And the way you get to that place is to bring the whole thing first to God, and keep bringing it until his peace is guarding your heart and mind.

So here's the thing: if we vent *with* God, we can be peaceable with others; if we vent *at* others, we won't have peace anywhere. All that tends to do is stir us up even more conflict. So may I commend the way of prayerfulness? I am guessing some of you here are locked in seemingly irreconcilable conflicts with others, and part of the reason is that you're venting too much and praying too little. Reverse that pattern, and see what happens.

Fourth, Paul says, Whatever is true... Focus on that!

Paul exhorts us to undertake some positive thinking. Positive thinking, because he wants us to see the good in everything and everyone.

There was a day Euodia and Syntyche had no problem seeing the good in one another. That's how they became friends of one another and servants of the gospel. But whatever came between them affected their eyesight, and now they can't see one good thing in the other. Paul asks them to reverse that: practice seeking virtues, not shortcomings. Practice singing each other's praises, not catcalling each other's vices. Confess your own sins, not one another's.

Finally, Paul reminds us that this isn't just something we are to think about, it is something we are to put into practice. And Paul offers himself as an example. How you have seen me conduct my life; that is how you should conduct your life. Don't just mouth the words, live it out. If you want the peace of God in your life and not conflict; starting following through on Paul's words.

At the beginning of the message I told you I had a strategy for winning at the game of Battleship. Basically I had a pattern. If I followed my pattern I was more often victorious in sinking my opponent's battleship.

What Paul offers here is a strategy, a pattern for how we can seek to resolve conflict in our relationships. I believe that if we take the pattern Paul lays out in these verses from Philippians 4 we can not only experience the peace of God in our live and in our church; but even in the world that so desperately needs the peace of God.

Will you join me in making our message of Good News something that the world believes because Jesus disciples practice unity by resolving conflict?

To triumph fully, evil needs two victories, not one. The first victory happens when an evil deed is perpetrated; the second victory, when evil is returned. After the first victory, evil would die if the second victory did not infuse it with new life. —Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory* (Eerdmans, 2006), p. 9