

Wisdom and Conflict

Intro:

We are working through a year of biblical literacy, going through some of the major genres and sections of the Bible to hopefully elevate our collective understanding as we engage with Scripture the rest of our lives.

Currently we're in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and have been studying particularly from the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is a collection of sayings and truisms with the intention of imparting wisdom. Its intention is to help us effectively navigate our daily lives in God's world. There is a way that things work, and wisdom is lining ourselves up with how things work as much as we possibly can. It gives us the best shot at our lives going well, or at least not ruining our lives.

One of the things that makes Proverbs unique compared to much of the rest of scripture is the style in which it is written. For the most part, it's a scattershot grab bag of quips and tips. Almost like an inspired bucket of fortune cookie sayings. It's not arranged linearly or topically, it's back and forth and all over the place. Which means, necessarily, that in order to glean from it, you have to pay attention to patterns and to what keeps getting brought back up. So then teaching from it, for the most part we aren't working through one longer passage from the book and instead we are collecting verses throughout the book according to topic.

Last week we did that as we discussed the topic of friendship. You might consider today a part 2 on the subject. Today we're gonna talk about something that inevitably comes along with having relationships with other people...our subject for today is conflict.

One of the tricky things about conflict is that there are a lot of ways that you can do it wrong or unwisely. You can be overly indulgent and therefore have more conflict than is necessary. You can be overly avoidant and therefore have less conflict than is necessary. You can make small things into big things and create conflict where there isn't any. You can try to act like big things are small things, you can let small things go unaddressed until you explode in a big way that wouldn't have happened if you would have calmly addressed it early on, and on and on I could go.

I could give you a list, and I'm sure you could too, of families that are a mess because they struggle to wisely handle conflict. I could give you a list of married couples who are in varying states of disarray because they struggle to wisely handle conflict. I could give you a list of people who used to be friends because of some type of conflict.

Proverbs says as much...

Proverbs 18:19

A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city, and quarreling is like the bars of a castle.

What purpose do bars on a castle serve? Their purpose is to keep people separated. To keep people apart. And that's what quarrels, unresolved disagreements, poorly handled conflict does...it separates people.

So let's start here, let's do some self diagnoses, self revealing. If I were to break us down into two categories, which is oversimplified but just go with it.

On one side of the spectrum are the more conflict averse people. Doing everything you can to avoid conflict of all types...all the way to the extreme of "I will let you keep doing something that bothers me for the rest of my life because I would rather die than have one hard conversation."

OK then we have the other end of the spectrum with conflict forward people. A good argument brings you alive. Arguing is your love language. You're more like "oh I'll say what needs to get said! What's the quiet part? I'll say it out loud!"

Ok who are my conflict averse people? What about conflict forward?

Well the good news is, the book of Proverbs provides some help for us wherever we land on the continuum. Let's read a few and then we'll pull out our first point.

Proverbs 20:3

It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling.

Prov 19:11

Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.

Proverbs 17:9

Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.

1 - Do all you can to avoid unnecessary conflict.

And all the enneagram 2's and 9's said, "this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God."

Glory to overlook an offense. An offense. Which means you are offended. Someone did something, said something, behaved in a certain way that hurt you. That bothered you.

And you don't say anything about it. You don't bring it up. You don't begin to treat them differently. You don't start ignoring them or avoiding them. You don't start making passive aggressive comments. You are neither aggressive nor passive aggressive about it and instead, you overlook, you cover the offense in love and move on about your day. In the words of the famous female scandinavian prophet Elsa of Arindale, you let it go. The only person you might talk to about it is God, and that's it.

Some of us tend to be very good lawyers when it comes to our own mistakes and weaknesses but very good judges when it comes to other people's mistakes and weaknesses. If that is you, Proverbs says you need to drop the gavel. That is not what God intends for your relationships. It is not healthy or wise. There will be offenses you need to overlook, refuse to pass judgment on, even forget.

Early in our marriage Courtney and I got into so many arguments and conflicts. We still do but we did it back then too.

Nah we've improved on this. It might actually be the single greatest area of improvement in our entire marriage if only because we had so much opportunity for improvement. When you start at horrible and move to just shy of mediocre... that's a lot of improvement.

Meeting with older guy, 3 categories for conflict. immediately deal with it, deal with it right time, overlook.

The New Testament term for overlooking is forbearance. I am bearing with you and have decided in advance to preemptively forgive you and bear with you. This is what allows you to not push away from bothersome, annoying, weak sinners. Everyone has something about them that could make other people push away from them. Because they are doing that thing...again. Whatever that thing is, everybody has one, if not more than one. And the more you know someone and the closer you are to someone, the more aware of that thing you are. Which means the closer you are to someone, the more forbearance will be required. The more offenses will need to be covered.

This ought be a distinguishing factor for christians. There should be a noticeable difference between a follower of Jesus and someone who does not follow Jesus when it comes to forgiveness. As we grow in maturity in Christ, we be becoming slower to give voice to how other people are bothering us, slower to be offended, slower to make a big deal about how we felt wronged or offended. It's part of what christian maturity looks like. We increasingly forgive as Jesus forgives, we increasingly overlook offenses, we increasingly love in a way that covers a multitude of sins.

Now. That's not what we do every time though. Some things need to be addressed.

Proverbs 27:5-6

Better is open rebuke than hidden love. 6 Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

Prov 17:10

A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.

2 - Sometimes, right relationship is only available on the other side of conflict.

So, listen, part of what this is communicating is that sometimes conflict IS necessary. Sometimes conflict is needed if you want to be in right relationship with someone.

Sometimes the most loving thing to do is engage. You gotta have that category, both for yourself and for others.

There are going to be times where you are going to need to address something in a relationship. There are going to be times where someone needs to address something with you in a relationship. Good faith arguments are necessary if you want to be close to someone. And sometimes the only way to intimacy is through conflict.

Listen, when relational rifts, breakdowns, or just weirdness happen, there is already conflict there. There's already a reality that things are not right, things are not okay. At that point, avoiding conflict is just pretending. It's an act. And there is a limit to how close you can feel to someone when you have to pretend around them.

The presence of conflict doesn't mean something is wrong with the relationship overall. Failing to deal healthily with conflict means something is wrong.

In fact, many times the absence of conflict means you are not actually walking closely with people.

What these verses teach us is that some things do need to be addressed so that the relationship can be right. The "wounds" of a friend are faithful and needed.

I would imagine that some of you have some things you need to bring to someone, things that probably don't belong in the 'overlook' category. But instead of bringing them up, you've tried to bury them. You tiptoe around the conversation, stuff that feeling when it comes up, and fool yourself by telling yourself you'll bring it up eventually.

No guarantees are possible in conflict. I can't tell you how it's gonna go. I don't know all the factors and personalities and maturity levels involved. But I can tell you that you're missing out on the only possible route to healing and repair and intimacy if you bury stuff and avoid necessary conflict.

If there's a dynamic in your marriage or family or friend group where there's a person who generally gets tiptoed around because you just want to do everything in your power to avoid unpleasant conflict with them, well, I would just ask you "How is it possible to feel close to someone you are tiptoeing around?" Is that what you want in your marriage, your friend group, your family? Is that the level of intimacy you are content with?

You may be thinking, "Yeah, but if I bring that to them, boy it's going to be rough," and depending on the context, yeah it might be. But it may also be the only possible road to true intimacy and growth for both them and you.

And while we're on this topic, somewhere along the way people started saying something that I think is ridiculous. "Mom is always right. Happy wife, happy life." We even tell newlywed men "if you want to be happy just let her win."

Mom isn't always right. Neither is dad. Nobody is always right. What are we talking about? Sometimes dad is doing something that is bad for him and bad for the family. Sometimes mom is doing something that is bad for her and bad for the family. Those are things that need to be engaged. Nobody wins if the family suffers while everyone just tries to appease and tip toe around the dominant personality.

So don't shy away from necessary conflict. Because it just might be the only path to get to intimacy and close healthy relationships.

A few weeks ago, Courtney and I had a stretch where we just weren't seeing eye to eye on some things. We were both a little bit hurt and little bit of coldness in our interactions. And it had been that way for a long enough time that I realized it wasn't gonna go away on its own. It was probably a wednesday or thursday and I went to her and said "When you're ready, come on because we need to have an argument so that we can have a good weekend. I want to have a good weekend with you, where everything is good with us. And the only path that gets us there is for us to have an argument and work through this conflict that we have."

Sometimes, that's the reality of the situation. Where right relationship is only available on the other side of conflict, so you've got to go through it.

3- In conflict, seek to understand, not just convince.

Prov 18:13

If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.

Prov 18:17

The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.

Proverbs 18:2

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.

In conflict, the goal is not to be right, the goal is to make things right. Winning is not convincing the other person. Winning is getting whatever was between you dealt with and out of the way so that you are back in right relationship and there is nothing between you anymore.

If you and I are in a conflict, my problem is not you. It isn't me against you. We aren't against each other. We are a team and we are against the problem... whatever the problem is, we are trying to come together to solve the problem, to figure out a solution. "This is the issue and we are the team. How do we come to an agreement on this? Even if it's an agreement of agreeing to disagree amicably."

One of the best ways you can do this is to make it your goal to be able to say what the other person thinks, in a way that they identify with. Until you can do that, don't move forward. Repeat their argument back to them in a way that they say "Yes that is what I think. That is what I am trying to communicate."

And I don't think I can overstate how important this part is. Never assign motives or intent. When you are hurt or confused or whatever, never say, "Well I know why you did that! It's because you..." No no no. Rather take the approach of, "Hey, will you help me understand... why did you do this?"

When you said that, what did you actually mean?" Try to understand and not just fill in plot points to a story that makes sense to you.

If could add one more bit of information here,

Proverbs 24:26

An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips.

Honesty. The way I talk about communication is... Say what you mean and mean what you say.

-Say what you mean. Nobody can read your mind. No, I should not have picked up on your hints and clues. If you wanted me to know what you thought, you needed to say it. Say what you mean.

-And mean what you say. If you say you don't care what we have for dinner, don't complain when I cook something you realize you don't prefer. You said you didn't care. You need to mean what you say.

Operating like that is the only way to have clarity and unity. If we don't operate by those rules, then we are left with a giant guessing game where we can't go off of each others' words and we somehow have to become mind readers. It's exhausting and leads to breakdown so don't do that. Make your words give honest, clear answers and stand by them. It will be like a kiss on the lips.

Indirect communicators, us direct communicators don't know what you are saying unless you say it. We don't speak through hints and clues and subtlety. If you mean it, then say it. And if you say it, then mean it. Bare minimum, as you enter into a difficult conversation, you need to be able to answer these 3 questions beforehand.

What did they do?

How did it affect you?

What would you like them to do moving forward?

4) Resolve conflict like a christian.

We have been rescued from our sin by Christ, so we don't fight like the world fights. We can cover and forgive offenses because we have had plenty of offenses covered and forgiven by Christ. We can seek understanding and repair because we know we've contributed to plenty of breakdowns and probably this one too.

The book we use for premarital counseling is called When Sinners Say I Do, and it's oriented around 1 Timothy 1:15 where Paul calls himself the worst of all sinners. The idea is that in a marriage, if both people can realize and truly see themselves as the worst sinner in their marriage, then they will always have grace for one another because of what grace has been extended to them.

A lot of times the reason why conflict goes from level 1 to a much higher level is because there is something under the surface that gets triggered by a random situation. There's insecurity there. Fear. There's pride that gets exposed. There's a deep sense of shame. Someone says they don't like how you folded their shirt and you think they are saying they reject you and don't love you anymore.

Whatever it is, when you get triggered on a level like that, you just want to win. You want to feel morally superior. The feeling of moral superiority is a powerful one. It is enticing and addictive. I'm right, you're wrong. I'm good, you're bad. You're the problem, I'm the solution. I'm better than you. I'm above you. I'm superior to you. People will do unbelievable things so that they can feel morally superior to others.

The gospel of Jesus reminds us that we are morally superior to no one. We are sinners who deserve God's wrath but have been given salvation, gifted righteousness.

Some people, there has literally never been a time where they said the words "You know what, you are right. And I am wrong." You're telling me you've done nothing but bat one thousand your whole life? You never got anything wrong? Far be it for a Christian to ever be that person, because our faith starts by admitting we were dreadfully wrong.

Our posture should always be grace. Even if you are right and they are wrong, the posture is grace. It means my tone, my posture, my body language, my choice of words, my disposition, everything about me screams grace to a fellow sinner. The humility that I'm not God, I just know him.

In the New Testament, Paul says

5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. Philippians 4:5

Let your reasonableness be known...to everyone. Reasonableness. As in, relatively speaking you should be easy to get along with because you know Jesus. You should not be uptight and insecure and sensitive and easily offended. People should not have to walk on eggshells around you.

You should have a tone and posture of warmth and grace and acceptance and love. And even when you step into needed conflict, it should be with a posture of seeking understanding, speaking the truth with minimum necessary aggressiveness, all with a desire to make things right and get back to enjoying that relationship as is appropriate. After such an interaction with you, people should walk away thinking, "That was reasonable."

But don't forget the last word in the verse. To everyone. That doesn't leave a lot of wiggle room. Everyone includes your spouse. Your kids. The coworker or boss who annoys you most. The neighbor whose dog keeps pooping in your yard. The customer service rep you finally get on the phone with.

Of course we can and should be truthful, honest, direct. But also reasonable. Charitable. Christlike even in the heat of conflict.

The only way we'll be able to heed all of the wisdom Proverbs gives us on this topic is to start from the reality that it was we who were in conflict with God, first and foremost. Our sin creates a sort of cosmic conflict with God himself.

But God, as Ephesians 2 says, being rich in mercy, lavished his love upon us through Christ. He took the initiative to step across the gap we couldn't cross. He dealt with our sin by sending his perfect Son to live and die on our behalf.

He dealt with the conflict between us so that we could have right relationship with him. And it's his unreasonable mercy towards us that allows us to be reasonable to everyone.

So we resolve conflict with the same grace that's been offered to us.

Let's pray.