

“UNTANGLE PERSONAL CONFLICTS” By Pastor YAU  
Matthew 5:23-26 June 19, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

1) Conflicts on a political level: If you have been following the news recently, you know the political arena is in a mess, particularly in the presidential election primaries. It is clear now that Donald Trump is the presumptive nominee on the Republican side while Hillary Clinton is on the Democrat side. During the primaries, all candidates would and did use their utmost skills to attack their competitors, which created sore feelings for the losers. Some of the Republican losers are seeking revenge. Instead of following the maxim “If you can't beat him, join him,” they vowed to boycott him in the general election, making sure they would shatter their party and hand the presidency to Hillary. Some of us may be critical of these political bosses who can't take loss graciously and may effectively hand the White House to Mrs. Clinton. I am amazed that these political old guards play the game like 7- to 8-year-old children in the playground: If I can't win, I don't want you to win either. The results: they will sink with Donald Trump.

2) Conflicts on a personal level: Have you ever had serious conflict that you still can't forget with someone whom you still can't forgive? How long ago, and for what reason? Do you remember how you felt at that time and how you feel about it today? In our personal relationships with people around us in all areas of life, there may be more conflicts than we want to admit or remember. Some may be trivial while

others may be serious. This happens to all of us because we are all different in many ways and it is impossible to live life or do things in harmony with others all the time. Although we can't prevent conflicts from happening, we certainly can manage the level of trouble and the manner of handling them to minimize damage on both sides. Learning how to solve problems or conflicts isn't easy but it's necessary to minimize the losses in our pursuit of what we want to achieve and to rebuild the relationships we want, particularly with those who are important and dear in our lives.

CONFLICTS AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE: Some of us may be surprised to see conflicts happen among good people or godly people, but they do. Jesus was talking about a godly man who followed the law and was on the way to bring an offering to the altar. This man wasn't just obedient to God in his worship and offering sacrifices, he was also good in his heart, continued to examine his life and wanted to set all things right with God and people. Let's see why godly and good people can still have conflicts:

1) The issue of position: In Matthew 20:20-28, the disciples had this conflict with each other: The mother of two disciples came to ask Jesus to place her two sons on both sides of Jesus in his coming kingdom, and that caused the other ten disciples to become indignant or very angry. (20:24) In some cases, conflicts among God's people are rooted in personal pride and the temptation of vainglory, wanting position, recognition, honor and authority over and above others. We need to remember that in service to the Lord, there isn't such a thing

as position or glory involved. Every time when Paul wrote to Christians, he always called himself “a servant of the Lord Jesus.”

2) The issue of practices: In Acts 15:1-11, Peter had serious conflicts with brothers who came to Antioch from Jerusalem about the issue of how Gentiles could become believers: whether they first become Jews by circumcision or just come by their faith in the grace of God through Jesus Christ. This conflict ended up in a church conference in Jerusalem led by James. Sometimes, conflicts arise due to ways of doing things which relate to tradition or history of practice and not because of doctrinal differences. Both sides are good people but to insist on one way, my way, can create conflicts between good people.

3) The issue of teamwork: In Acts 15:35-41, Paul had serious conflict with his mentor and mission partner Barnabas over John Mark, whether he should be included in their next mission journey. John Mark was a teammate of Paul and Barnabas on their first mission trip, but he soon left the team and returned to Jerusalem, seemingly not able to stand the hardship of mission work. In my 50 years of service to the Lord, I have seen many John-Marks in today's churches: People who at first are fervent for the Lord, but couldn't stand the test of time and difficulties, they left their service, sometimes even left God. This happened to lay people as well as to those who were called to serve God full-time. God gave Mark a second chance and he recommitted his life to God; even Paul later called him “helpful in his ministry.” (2 Tim 4:11)

4) The issue of leadership: Few churches had the same blessings of great leaders as did the church at Corinth: They had Paul and Apollos as their leaders at the same time. Paul was excellent in mission work while Apollos was very good in teaching the Bible. (Acts 18:24-28) But the church began to have serious conflicts with loyalty to leaders: Some sided with Paul, others sided up with Apollos, and still others claimed to be with Christ. That conflict almost caused the church to split, so that Paul had to use almost a whole chapter in the Bible, 1 Corinthians 3, to address the problem and encourage them to be humble and be united. He said: “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants, nor he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow. (1 Cor 3:6-7) Being loyal to leaders is good, but human loyalty should never become an issue if it creates conflicts that may cause harm to the church.

WHEN YOU ARE THE OFFENDER: There is a good Chinese saying: “It's better to untangle conflicts than to tighten them.” No one wants to keep conflicts for a long time because they hurt relationships. The problems is, how? In Jesus' parable here, we see five steps we can learn and use to untangle conflicts:

1) First, we need to be a godly person: “Therefore if you are offering your gift at the altar.” (5:23a) A godly person is one who has a good heart on his inside, wanting to follow God's law, and wants to do good with others on the outside. In 5:23, this man was at the altar to offer sacrifices to God as prescribed by the Law. A man who seeks to honor God is

usually a man who wants to do good in his life. (I know not all good men will do that.) Most people who don't revere God in their hearts don't care about how to treat others right on their outside. Being a godly person, wanting to live according to God's teaching, is the starting point to seek peace with people around us. There is another Chinese saying: "If a man doesn't revere God in his heart, he won't respect man in his eyes."

2) Second, we need to examine our heart: "There remember that your brother has something against you." (5:23b) If we care about our relationship with God, we also need to care about our relationships with people; this describes a truly godly person. About 10% of the Bible teaches us how to build relationship with God, the other 90% how to demonstrate it in our relationships with people. In our pursuit of a spiritual relationship with God, we also need to pursue good relationships with people. We cannot just care to fulfill our duties as a godly person on the religious side. We also need to fulfill duties with people on the relational side. This is not just because it is in the Bible; it is also good for us to be faithful disciples in reaching others for Christ.

3) Third, we need to see our own sins: "That your brother has something against you." (5:23c) Something here is "ought" in KJV; it means "angry against you." The Chinese Union version translated this much better: "Your brother is holding *grudges* against you." This means he had offended his brother and he knew it, therefore he "remembered." Most of us remember how others have offended us, mistreated us, caused us pain and suffering, for a long, long time. We tend to miss

or forget how we have offended others. This man is different: He remembers he has offended his brother and the memory bothers him so much even in his act of offering sacrifices to God, at the time when he was seeking closer relationship with God. This is a great example for all of us to learn: Never forget the offenses we have inflicted on others as we usually remember how much others have offended us.

4) Then, he did the first thing first: “Leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” (5:24) Most of us have twisted the priority in our relationship building. We tend to care more about our relationship with God than with people. But Jesus wants us to see the proper priority: We need to settle our conflicts with our brothers *before* we come to make our offering to God. This brings me to tell you how I feel some of us are not doing things right. We have seen some among us who didn't care much about conflicts or bad relationships with our brothers but pretend or ignore the seriousness of this condition, and continue to offer our services to God. Here I can tell you: this isn't what Jesus wants us to do. We need to settle our dispute or conflict with our brother, and then our offering will be acceptable to our God. Without that clear conscience of peace with our brothers, we can't be effective in our service or offering to God.

5) Finally, he paid the price to settle: “First, go and be reconciled with your brother.” (5:24a) “Reconciled” means to make it up, to pay the price so you can restore the relationship. This could be some nice words of apology, to compensate the loss or hurt you have caused, to seek

forgiveness from your brother or any other thing you need to do to show your sincerity in seeking reconciliation of peace. In the following vs. 25-26, Jesus wants us to know that we won't be forgiven or be reconciled without paying our debts. In our need of spiritual reconciliation, Jesus pays it all with his blood. But in our relationship with people around us, we need to pay the price ourselves.

WHEN YOU ARE THE OFFENDED: (Ephesians 4:26-32) In every conflict, there are at least two parties: One is the offender, and the other is the offended. The five steps presented above are things the offender should do. Here are steps if you are the offended.

1) In your anger, do not sin: Few people can hold back anger when they are offended. Paul didn't say anger is good, but he worries more about the things we may do or say in anger. Unless we are very good at self control, most of us will get angry when we are offended. Being angry isn't the worst; doing or saying things in anger that may inflict hurt or harm on others and escalating the conflict is so much worse that Paul calls it sin. Many of us have had bad experiences in saying or doing the wrong thing in anger which we regretted later but it's too late. This is the most common reaction for many of us. We need to stop.

2) Don't hold on to anger for too long: Paul suggests that we don't hold on to anger overnight. That is very hard to do, but it is important. Holding anger for long time may lead to other unexpected consequences. Some people will keep anger for a very long time which will continue to be the stumbling block

in a relationship. Others may let anger simmer for a long time for vengeance. If we allow anger to stay and grow, it may become a force we have no control over.

3) Don't give the devil a foothold: In military term, a foothold is a beachhead, a starting ground for advance and attack. Paul reminds us that Satan will use our anger to manipulate our emotions, to confuse our priorities and to lead us into its trap where we can't get out. Satan is very good in promoting further conflicts to divide and destroy us, particularly when we are in an emotional condition instead of a spiritual condition.

4) Banish all bitterness and rage: “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.” (4:31) Paul sums it up: Stop fighting evil with evil. Put to rest conflicts that may escalate into something we can't foresee or expect. Stop the fire before it's too late.

5) Be kind and forgiving: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (4:32) I don't believe anyone needs more explanation on this point.

### THINGS WE CANNOT DO:

1) We cannot compromise on biblical truth and moral issues. Biblical truth is essential for salvation, while moral standards set in God's word are our guide for everyday living. There always will be conflicts in these areas that we cannot compromise on or retreat from.

2) We cannot force others to resolve conflicts. There will be people who will never want to settle conflicts, but fight to the

end. King Saul was one of those people. All we can do is our part, and leave it to God's hand.

3) We cannot instigate conflicts. Humility and patience go a long way to avoid conflicts. Remember, you may not be right all the time. Allow others to express their opinions and be willing and humble to consider them. One hand cannot make a

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