

Kingdom Conflicts

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As we can see from reading about the lives of the original twelve apostles, the call to discipleship doesn't exempt us from conflicts. These conflicts occur within us and from without, with fellow believers and nonbelievers. It is interesting to look into Scripture at the various conflicts the disciples had. I believe if we can grasp and apply the root cause of the conflicts in the disciples' lives, we can make our own discipleship journey less difficult.

Be aware that when I use the word "disciple" I am using it in a broader sense than just the twelve apostles. Scripture indicates that there were dozens, if not hundreds, of disciples who followed Jesus at various times during his public ministry.

Disciples Must Understand the Spiritual Realm

The disciples had great difficulty understanding many of Jesus' teachings. They had trouble grasping the eternal, spiritual realm and its importance compared to the temporal, natural world in which they and we live. This temporal, natural world and its order are destined for destruction. The spiritual world and its laws are unchanging and eternal. Once we become born-again we become citizens of this eternal spiritual world. Paul saw these two realms clearly and emphasized the difference:

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (II Cor 4:18 NIV).

Let's look at one instance of this lack of understanding displayed by Jesus' disciples:

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" (Matt 16:21-22 NIV).

Here Jesus teaches His disciples that He had to pay the price for sin. He had to be offered as an eternal sacrifice in the spiritual realm. Two thousand years later, as we read in Scripture about Jesus' last days on earth, we can see what He had to do. But the disciples could not. Everything in Peter's natural response rejected the idea of His death. Peter simply wanted Christ to continue to live in the only world Peter knew, this natural world.

After we are born again, the Lord gives us opportunity after opportunity to grow into more maturity in this spiritual realm. But these opportunities produce conflicts within us between our own natural human, self-centered nature, and the Christ-centered nature of a sanctified life.

Let's look at some of these opportunities which produced conflicts in the minds and lives of the disciples.

Conflict # 1: Disciples Must Not Be Offended By Jesus

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. (Jn 6:53-54 NIV).

But some of His disciples said,

"This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" Aware that His disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you?..." (Jn 6:60-61 NIV).

Yes, apparently some of His disciples were offended. In fact Scripture indicates that **many** of his would-be disciples deserted Jesus after this teaching. (Jn 6:66)

Why were they offended? Because Jesus was teaching things that were contrary to their human nature--things that were very hard to hear. They wanted a Savior on their terms. Today many people want a Savior, but they don't really want Jesus on the Bible's terms. So they try to change Jesus to suit their image of who He ought to be.

In fact, many of Jesus' disciples today have removed everything from their doctrine that they find offensive. They have removed such teachings as the virgin birth, the blood atonement, that Jesus is the only way to salvation, the rebirth experience, belief in original sin, eternal judgment, a literal hell, and so on.

Like the disciples of old, the question facing every believer today is: do we want to accept the Bible's teachings as they are stated, or, because they offend our human nature, do we reject them? We know the answer, don't we? The King James Bible makes it clear, "Blessed are those who are not offended in me." (Matt 11:6) Yes, if we want His full blessings, we must accept all of Scripture as the Word of God, even the hard parts.

Conflict #2: Love Your Enemies

Early in Jesus' ministry He preached the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew's Gospel records these words:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: **Love your enemies** and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven..." (Matt 5:43-45 NIV emphasis added).

This must have been an amazing teaching for the disciples to hear. How could even Jesus call them to love and pray for their enemies? There are no specific Scripture passages which tell us exactly how the disciples learned to "love their enemies." However, we do know enough

about the lives of the disciples to make some observations about human nature.

During the time Jesus ministered on earth, there was an outlawed political party known as the Zealots. Zealots were very conservative Jews who advocated the violent overthrow of the Roman government's rule of Israel. They loved the laws of God and considered themselves to be the defenders of Israel's independence and liberty. They hated the Roman occupation of their nation.

But the Zealots had other enemies besides the Romans. They also hated the Jews who had "sold out" to the Romans. By "sold out" I mean the Jews who, by choice, helped the Romans rule over the Jewish nation. To be forced into service against one's will was excusable, but to volunteer one's services to the Romans was considered treason. Any Jew who voluntarily worked for the Romans was vehemently despised by the Zealots.

Among the Twelve there was such an individual, Matthew. Before he became a follower of Jesus he was a tax collector for the Roman government. Tax collectors weren't just hated...they were the object of special hatred. Now, among the Twelve, along with Matthew, we also have a Zealot, Simon the Zealot!

In my mind's eye I can see Jesus and His disciples checking into a hotel with Jesus assigning the rooms. Pairing off His disciples, Jesus says, "Matthew, how about you and Simon sharing a room?"!

Isn't it just like Jesus to put us in His church along with people we don't like? Or has Jesus allowed you to be in a job, school, or social setting with people whom you would rather not associate? In fact, many of us have experienced situations in which such a person has lied about, falsely accused, verbally attacked, or in some other way undermined us! Sadly, this happens both within and without the church.

"But I tell you: love your enemies...pray for them!"

This is hard teaching, Jesus. Help us.

I know human nature well enough to know that there was conflict between Matthew and Simon the Zealot. There had to be, at least in the early stages of their relationship. But I also believe they overcame it. So can we. But how?

I believe the answer is twofold. First, do exactly what Jesus said to do: pray for those with whom we are in conflict. Second, do not retaliate or seek revenge. Revenge is God's responsibility. (Rom 12:19) We are to leave it with Him.

As Christians the goal or objective in loving our enemies is not necessarily full reconciliation with that person. That may never happen. The issue is rather that of attaining a pure heart. Hatred, self-vindication, malice, and the like, contaminate the heart and spirit of the bearer. We free our own spirits and hearts, and cleanse ourselves of guilt in

such matters by praying for the violator and by restraining the human tendency to strike back. In so doing we prevent the contamination of our own hearts and attain the goal of Jesus' teaching.

Notice that Jesus continues in this passage about loving our enemies to say:

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?
Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others?
Do not even pagans do that? (Matt 5:46,47 NIV).

What is Jesus trying to tell us here? I believe He is giving us another guideline for the relationships He wants His disciples to have. Jesus is saying that if we greet only our "brothers" (and "sisters") we are no better than unbelievers in our behavior. In other words, Jesus wants us to conduct ourselves in such a way that we will always be free to greet every single other believer in Christian love.

Let me put this principle into a practical context. Suppose you have had a falling out with a fellow believer. Even if you do not feel abundant Christian love for that brother, you are to do whatever it takes to reestablish at least a casual relationship with the one who has offended you. If you are obedient in reestablishing this relationship, then whenever you encounter this brother, at least you can greet one another freely and in Christian forgiveness. How many of us allow situations to drag on where we are uncomfortable at the thought of running into brother so-and-so, or sister so-and-so, at church on Sunday morning, or at a wedding, or at a meeting? This should not be.

I realize that the reestablished relationship may never be one of closeness. It may never be the same way it was before the breach. But at least you will be free to greet one another, just as Jesus tells us to do. I guarantee you, if you follow this principle, it will give you great freedom as you move within the Body of Christ.

Conflict #3: Jesus Must Be Lord

We see another point of conflict in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus was discussing the cost of discipleship with His followers. He stressed that in order to follow Him, one must forsake all else. Here is the reaction of one of His disciples to this teaching:

Another disciple said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." (Matt 8:21-22 NIV).

If we take a literal reading of this passage, we miss what Jesus is saying. A literal interpretation would assume that the man's father was lying in a casket somewhere with the funeral service pending. If that were so we ask, "Couldn't Jesus let the man have just a few hours to go bury his father?" But this is not the correct interpretation of this passage.

Here is what the man was really saying, "My father is well advanced in his years, let me stay with him until he dies. Then I will come and follow you." To which Jesus answered, "Follow me, and let the (spiritually) dead bury their own dead."

This is nothing short of a demand by Jesus that He be first in the life of every believer. Jesus does not try to hide the cost while extending the invitation to true discipleship. He must be Lord of all in our lives.

There are some people who immediately and without reservation place Jesus first the moment they are saved. Paul was certainly one such person. It appears that once he had his conversion experience and accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior, from then on he never deviated. This is very commendable. But obviously, not all of us are like Paul.

I believe the more common experience is for one to say, "I love Jesus, and I know He is my Savior, but I have not really made Him first in my life. What can I do to make Him first?" This is a very practical question. Obviously, this person is born again. He or she just has not made Jesus the Lord of his life yet. When we do make Him our Lord, we do what He commands, even when it is contrary to our human nature.

I believe that for most of us making Jesus first in our lives involves a process. For some it may take years, or even decades. For those who go the "process" route, it is my observation that the process has three distinct stages:

1. Stage One - "Why me?"

Life's circumstances are often hard. Things happen to us that are hurtful, unpleasant, discouraging, and even devastating. Soon after one becomes a Christian he or she discovers that these difficulties in life rarely stop. When a hard situation comes into a Christian's life it's easy to tell when he or she is at stage one because the first cry to God out of his mouth is usually, "God, why did this happen to me? I don't deserve this...why me?"

This is what I call the "why me?" stage. The answer to the question is in the question..."Why **ME**?" The fact is, "ME" is the problem. "ME" is the center of the universe -- God is in orbit around "ME." God is my servant; when I have a problem I call on God but **only** then. All the rest of the time **I** am in control of my life not God.

As part of understanding this principle, it's important to know that God didn't cause the problem. It is simply the event that brought forth the "why me?" question. But rest assured, God will work in the problem. He will work to remove the "ME" from the center of this believer's universe. His "work" may not change the problem, but rather He begins to make inward changes in us!

2. Stage Two - "All Things Work Together for the Good"

As the believer matures through the "why me?" phase and continues to follow Jesus as best he knows how, God continues to mature the believer. Time passes and there is obvious spiritual growth. Then one day another unpleasant incident occurs in the life of our growing believer.

This time he or she goes tearfully to God in prayer. His prayer sounds something like this, "God, You see what has happened in my life. You know how utterly hurt I am over this. God, I don't understand what's happening, but I know one thing. Your Word says '...that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. Who have been called according to his purpose.' (Rom 8:28 NIV). God, You know I love You. You know I have been called according to Your purpose. I therefore choose to accept Your Word. I don't see how this can ever work good for me but Your Word says so, and that settles it. Amen."

How our believer has grown! He is now far beyond the "why me?" stage. But notice, all things work together for MY good. Who is still the center of the universe? Yes, there has been much growth, but "ME" is still the central figure. There is yet another stage.

3. Stage Three - "Jesus is Lord!"

Still more time passes while our believer is clinging to the Word of God and endeavoring to grow spiritually. A deep and loving relationship develops with the Lord Jesus. Our believer comes to realize that everything he has and is comes from Jesus, even the very breath he breathes. The "tragedies" of his life now have less impact on him for he has learned to rely more fully on Jesus.

Then one day the devil threatens his life or some other hard circumstance happens to him. The immediate response from our believer's mouth is, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Phi 1:21 NIV).

What victory! What a change since "why me?!" What can man do to him now? What can the devil do to him now? Nothing! And...who is now the center of his universe? God is! Jesus now has a **true** disciple, one who lets the spiritually dead bury their own dead and gets on with the business of following Jesus. Without question Jesus is now Lord of his life.

Every believer who goes through the "process" or spiritual growth route of making Jesus truly Lord can relate to these three stages of spiritual growth. Each can look back and see the changes that have removed the "me" from his heart's throne and placed Jesus there instead. Hallelujah!

Conflict #4: The Last Shall Be First

Let us look at one more of Jesus' teachings that produces conflicts among and within us. I have travelled much of the world and worked with many Christian leaders. Unfortunately, it has been my observation that many today have yet to learn the spiritual lesson the

Twelve also struggled with: many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first (Matt 19:30).

I see church leaders struggling to promote themselves, often at the expense of other leaders. They are using the world's ways to gain recognition. When this happens the world's ways have replaced Jesus' teaching in that person's heart. Let's look at what Jesus said about self-promotion:

They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." (Mk 9:33-35 NIV).

This "law of promotion" is clearly set forth in Scripture: The first shall be last and the last shall be first... **IF** we want the Lord's recognition instead of man's. Jesus spoke clearly about seeking man's reward:

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners **to be seen of men**. I tell you truth **they have received their reward in full**." (Matt 6:5 NIV emphasis added).

Obviously Jesus is speaking on the subject of prayer, but the principle-seeking to be recognized by man-is clearly applicable to self-promotion and self-aggrandizement. If you **seek** man's approval or promotion, **you have your reward!** And that's all the reward you'll ever get...man's, not God's.

You see, the truly mature Christian is not only past conflict with others, and he not only loves and has learned to pray for his enemy, but he has learned to be a servant. This willingness to be the true servant of all is the final stage in the sanctification process. It is in this stage that the servant is seeking to please only God.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a story. This story is one of the best

illustrations I can think of to show what Jesus meant by saying that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. The setting for the story is a large church. As is common, prayer requests were written on small cards and placed in the offering so they could be prayed over. Through the years the church had gained a reputation for having a high percentage of their prayers answered.

The senior pastor later admitted that he had begun to take pride in the high success rate of answered prayer. Then one day the church caretaker, a quiet, secluded old man, passed away. He had been the church caretaker for many years. He lived in the basement of the church, and, after his death, staff members went to remove the old man's possessions from his room. To their surprise and amazement they found the walls of his room literally lined with these small prayer request cards. Written in the old man's handwriting was the date that each request had been answered.

Those present immediately saw that for years the old man had been quietly interceding with God for the prayer requests until they were answered. His walls were a monument to God's faithfulness. The pastor was summoned to the room to see the thousands of cards. As he stood looking at the cards, he confessed he felt ashamed that he had somehow taken credit for all the answered prayers of his church. He knew at that moment that they were looking at the diary of a mighty prayer warrior who had fought great spiritual battles totally hidden from the eyes of man. Yes, truly, in God's spiritual realm, this old, quiet prayer warrior must be very close to being first!

Lord, help us, as Your disciples, learn these truths. Help us to know that we are citizens of Your kingdom and that we are aliens and strangers here on this earth. Help us to see more clearly Your kingdom and live in its dimension. Help us to never be offended in You or Your word. Help us to love those who are difficult to love. Teach us to pray for them, forgiving their sins as You did ours on Calvary. Help us to love You more. Help us to make You Lord, always placing Your interests ahead of our own. And finally, Lord, help us to truly understand what it means that "the last shall be first and the first shall be last." Help us to let You do the exalting. Teach us, Lord, to move into a truly sanctified spiritual maturity and thereby please You more and more.

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