

## *Dealing with Conflict*

Sunday 11 October 2009 – Peter Irvine  
Matthew 5:43-48 & Luke 6:27-28

Tui ad – Love your enemies, yeah right.  
Matthew - Sermon on the Mount. Luke - Sermon on the Plain.

### *Prayer*

We want to thank you today for the words of Jesus Christ and the power of His words to change lives. And we pray first that they will change our lives and that through us they will change the lives of others. In Jesus name, amen

I've called today's talk, 'Dealing with Conflict'.

Most of us here don't like conflict. I don't like it and if I can I will try to avoid conflict. Many years ago I use to help teach a course at work for our managers called conflict resolution. And on this course we would present various techniques and skills that they could use in meetings and other situations when they were presented with a conflict situation.

But I made the mistake one day of coming home and telling Marian about some of the conflict resolution skills we were teaching on this course. And shortly after that Marian and I were having a discussion - I can't even remember what it was about – but we had different points of view on what ever it was we were discussing. And I went straight into conflict resolution mode - to which Marian said "Don't you go using any of that conflict resolution stuff on me!"

But today we are going to look at what Jesus says about dealing with conflict.

We live in a divided world, we see international conflict, wars between nations we see civil wars, we see the Middle East conflict, we see localised hatred, bitterness and hostility. And even in neighbourhoods we see conflict between neighbours.

G K Chesterton says this "The Bible says love your neighbours and also to love your enemies, probably because they are generally the same people".

We are created for relationship. We are created to have a love relationship with God, and a love relationship with other people. But it is not always easy. There are some people we naturally get along with, and others where it is more difficult. And sometimes there are people who are rude or aggressive or hostile towards us. Sometimes it even comes from our own family. Sometimes from our friends. And at times we just find ourselves in varying degrees of conflict.

Now you might be here today and be at peace with everyone. No-one ever says things to you that hurt you, no-body ruffles your feathers, you get on well with everyone you work with, there is no-one you would rather avoid that be with, and everyone just seems to see things your way. And if that's you, that's fantastic. But it's not the norm.

Someone once said "Friends come and go, enemies accumulate".

It is not a sin to have enemies. Jesus had enemies William Wilberforce had enemies, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela they all had enemies and even mother Teresa had many enemies who did not like what she was doing. In fact if we are going to achieve anything for God the chances are that somewhere along the way it is going to arouse enmity.

And the question is "How do we respond?"

I love the story of Panfilo De Narvaez who died in 1548. He was a Spanish explorer and when he lay there dying his Father confessor asked him if he had forgiven all his enemies as it says to do in Bible to which Narvaez looked astonished and said "Father I have no enemies - I have shot them all". Maybe that's a way to respond.

But Jesus says 'Love your enemies'. Nobody up to Jesus had said it explicitly as this. "Love your enemies'. This passage starts with Jesus saying "You have heard that it says love you neighbour and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies'. The foot note in my Bible says "These words 'Hate your enemy' are not found anywhere in the Old Testament. However, hatred for ones enemies was an accepted part of the Jewish ethic at that time".

But Jesus now says explicitly "Love our enemies". And as I researched that statement I learnt that at the time that was a very radical thing to say.

How do we Love our enemies? It means demonstrating total forgiveness. And I'm going to talk about total forgiveness later.

But in this passage Jesus gives us 5 practical ways to handle a conflict.

And here is the first thing he says. Speak graciously.

Luke 6v28 Jesus says "Bless those that who curse you". The Greek word for bless is the same word used for, to speak well of, praise, extol. The word Eulogy has it's origins from this Greek word – speak graciously of. And Jesus says 'Bless those that curse you'. Respond by speaking graciously. And speaking for myself I'm often tempted in conflict situations to do the opposite.

I heard of a US senator who when he got letters from people that were rude or aggressive, he replied by returning the letter with a note he wrote attached to the bottom saying, 'I just thought you would like you to know that some nutcase has been writing to me using your name and address'. Jesus says don't reply like that. Don't be a smart-aleck, don't be harsh. Speak graciously. I think it's one of the dangers of e-mail is that we can reply so quickly, hitting the send key, before even having a chance to think graciously. Jesus says bless those that curse you. Not only to their face which is relatively easy, but if we are going to speak well of them, we need to speak kindly not only to their face but also behind their back.

2ndly respond kindly.

Luke 6v27 says, "Do good to those that hate you". It is the opposite to revenge or retaliation which can often be a vicious cycle. The way to break a vicious cycle is by non-retaliation even when we are in the right. Oh that's sometimes it's so hard to do isn't it - when we know we are right. It's a bit like when I'm driving down a narrow road and a truck comes along the other way and I know I have the right of way but I have to pull over because I can't get past and it's my right of way. I love the poem of Sammy Jay who died defending his right of way and on his tombstone it says.

Here lies the body of Sammy Jay  
Who died defending his right of way  
He was right as he went along

But he's just as dead as if he was wrong.

Revenge and retaliation doesn't just destroy the other person, it destroys us as well. There is a Chinese proverb I like. Whoever opts for revenge should dig two graves.

You know there is a time to be firm, to stand up for what is right. Jesus did that on many occasions. But he was never malicious or spiteful, or out of control.

Respond kindly.

3rd point. Pray positively.

It says in v44 pray for those that persecute you. It's not hard to pray 'Show them how wrong they are Lord. Bring them to a sticky end'. I'm sure no-body here prays like that. We just think it.

Pray positively. I read about a lady a while ago who had been deeply hurt when 2 colleagues at work had said things to her that had really hurt her. She said these words had such an impact on her that it negatively affected her at work, her relationship with friends, her relationship with God and she said she needed to talk with the two ladies about what they had said.

But she decided that before she spoke to them that for one month she was going to pray for them every day. And when the month was over she realised she didn't need to speak to them. At the end of the month she could still remember the words they had spoken but the words had lost their sting. And she realised the only reason she wanted to speak to them was to let them know how badly upset she had been. And how had she prayed during that month – she had prayed God's blessing on them. She prayed for their family, she prayed God's blessing on their work, their relationship with God, their relationship with others. The only thing this lady did not pray about was their relationship with her.

Jesus says pray for those that persecute you. How far do we go? I don't know. Jesus when he was being tortured prayed for those that were torturing him. On the cross he prayed "Father forgive them. They don't know what they are doing"

Pray for those that persecute you.

4thly Act divinely.

Someone once said,  
To return hate for love, that's is demonic  
To return love for love that's human  
But to return love for hate, that's divine  
That's what God does.

Verse 45 Jesus says to do these things "that you may be children of your father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous". In other words He does not discriminate. He sends the rain on everyone. The rain in the Middle East is regarded as a blessing. Maybe in NZ in the middle of winter it's not such a blessing. And we see that all around us. God's blessings are indiscriminate as He pours out His blessing on everyone. Everyone can enjoy the beauty that God has made. But more than that, God's grace is available to everybody however far they have fallen.

And what Jesus is saying here is look at people the way God looks at people.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow an 18th century poet said "If we could read the secret history of our enemies we would find in each person's life enough sorrow and suffering to disarm all hostility". Act divinely.

5thly. Live differently.

V46 Jesus says "If you love those who love you what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that". It's interesting that when Jesus goes for the worst possible people he can think of he goes for the tax collectors. And he goes on to say "And if you greet only your brothers what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"

You see we have to be different. If people around you aren't noticing that as a Christian you're different to everyone else – maybe there's a reason. You're not different.

And there is a reason why we need to be different to the pagans. Pagans don't believe there is a God who is going to judge. And that is the difference. Pagans want to do the judging and get vengeance themselves. Jesus says we should live differently because we have Faith in God. There will be a judgement, evil will be dealt with, and good will be rewarded, but its God who is going to do it.

And this is what Jesus is saying, this is what we should do, trust God to judge, trust God to vindicate.

If we are honest most of us all yearn for the moment of vindication, for the moment when everyone will see the truth. The wisest thing we can ever do when we are mistreated is to be quite about it. We love being vindicated. But our benchmark is Jesus. When he rose from the dead, did he go straight to Herod and say, "Well what do you think now". Do he go to Pontius Pilot or the chief priest. No - Jesus didn't go to anyone to clear his name. Jesus lost the battle to win the war. As sometimes Jesus wants us to loose a battle to win the war.

Jesus could have come down from the cross and said "See I am the Son of God – I told you so".

Thank God He didn't. God intended it for good. Living differently means be able to have total forgiveness. Total forgiveness is the ultimate difference from the way others respond.

This is a key point in living differently and dealing with conflict.

John F Kennedy said this. "Forgive your enemies, but never forget their names". Oscar Wilde said "Always forgive your enemies, nothing annoys them so much".

But Jesus goes way beyond this - total forgiveness. It's a key point that allows us to obey the command Love your enemies.

Total forgiveness is different from us just saying that we forgive someone and putting on loving smiles, while we still have some unloving or unresolved feelings or negative thoughts towards that person. But we are called as Christians to the extraordinary.

I was in London a few years ago and the entire UK was bought to focus by a terrible event that shocked the whole nation. An 18 year black boy was standing in a bus stop in Mersey waiting for the bus with his white girlfriend and his cousin. The boys name was Anthony Walker. There is a picture of Anthony. He was an A level student. He was a leader in his church's youth group. He wanted to be a lawyer. And a group of 4 white youths started taunting them with hateful racial abuse. Anthony and his friends started to just walk away, but the 4 youths started caught up with Anthony and attacked him. They had with them an ice axe with a 2' handle and they drove the ice axe 6 inches into his skull. His mother Mrs Gee Walker who is a special needs teacher went to the hospital and her last sight of her son alive was of him going into surgery with an ice axe buried in his skull. Anthony died a few hours later. And over the next few days as the police released more and more detail of the horrible senseless murder, the nation was stunned by the hatred that was the motivation for this attack. But what followed gripped the nation more so.

The 2 young men charged with Anthony's murder were Paul Millar and Michael Barton. During the trial Mrs Walker, Anthony's mother, sat in the court room listening to the shocking and horrific detail of how her son died.

The Times newspaper reported that on the day Paul Miller and Michal Barton were found guilty, that as Gee Walker left the court room a note was passed to her. It was from Paul Taylor the racist thug that had buried the axe in Anthony's head. And the note said he was sorry.

And the Times reported that if Paul Millar wanted forgiveness from Gee Walker - he was too late. She had already forgiven him - just as she had forgiven his accomplice Michael Barton. And there was a huge public reaction to Mrs Walker saying she that had forgiven Taylor and Barton. And Gee Walker was amazed at the public interest and debate on whether or not she should have forgiven them. Why would she even want to forgive them was the cry on TV and radio programmes. Should she forgive them? But to her it was obvious that she had to forgive. She answered racism and hate

with tolerance and love. She said it would insult the memory of Anthony to do anything else. Anthony, like her lived by the tenants of Jesus.

Read portion. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/england/merseyside/4471440.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/merseyside/4471440.stm)

She will never get over her loss. At the best all she can do is to learn to live with it. Do killers like Taylor and Barton deserve forgiveness? Mrs Walker doesn't see forgiveness like that. She regards it as central to her survival. She goes on to say, "Un-forgiveness is a heavy weight a big load to carry. I've seen what it does to people; it makes them bitter and angry. I don't want to be a victim twice over". And she remembers what Anthony said to her. "We can do everything through Christ Jesus. Even forgive and love our enemies".

That the extraordinary. That's living differently.

And Jesus concludes this passage with the very big challenge by saying in verse 48 "Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly father is perfect". Be perfect in relationships, perfect in love, not just for God and for our neighbours but also perfect in love for our enemies.

How is this possible? Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect. We look at it and say it is impossible, and in a sense it is impossible, but it can begin to be possible because of two things. Firstly, because of the cross, because we know we are forgiven, I know how much I have been forgiven. You don't know how much I have been forgiven, because I know things about me you don't know about me. It's when we know how much we have been forgiven that we can't hold anything against anyone. And the second thing that makes perfect love for our enemies possible is because of the Holy Spirit. Because God's love for us has been poured into our hearts. And that's what makes the difference. We can be extraordinary and live differently and love our enemies.

A little while ago I had the opportunity to hear the President of Rwanda speak. His name is Paul Kagame. There is a picture of President Paul Kagame. Rwanda is a country that has been decimated by acts of genocide. More than one in 10 of the population has been killed. In just 100 days alone in 1994 800,000 people were killed. All in a low tech way, killed with machetes and the like. The Hutu government ordered that all the Tutsis should be killed. Families, children, babies sliced up with machetes, neighbours killing neighbours. I'm sure you have read the accounts. Arguably it was the most intense genocide in the history of the world – 3 times faster than the holocaust over the same time period. They still haven't finished burying the dead 15 years later. But something amazing is happening in Rwanda today. Through the love and the power of Jesus Christ, healing and reconciliation and forgiveness is coming to come to that land. The President Paul Kagame is a Christian man and he has asked Rick Warren along with other world Christian leaders, to help him make Rwanda a purpose driven nation. President Kagame is working on a peace plan and the leaders of the peace plan have asked Christian churches to go to that nation and preach the gospel, to run Christian leadership conferences and rallies to restore love and peace and order to their country. And it's amazing to see what's happening. The country is turning around. Very slowly there is economic growth, but more amazing there is this extraordinary way that forgiveness is taking place. Who knows what the future of Rwanda is, but right now we are seeing the power of God addressing the conflict in this country. Only God's way is going to make a difference. Only God's way enables us to perfectly love our enemies.

There are so many extraordinary stories of true forgiveness coming out of this country. I spoke with a man who had a friend who during the genocide lost her husband and all 6 of her children. They were murdered. Not uncommon. And after some time she became a Christian. And the boy who killed her family admitted in court he had killed this family and showed the authorities where he had buried the bodies.

And after completing his sentence, he went straight to this woman who he had murdered her husband and 6 children and asked her to forgive him. And she forgave him. And after forgiving him, she looked at him and said, look you don't have anywhere to stay and I have a big house, would you like to live with me as my son. And the boy was so overwhelmed and he said yes. And now they live together as mother and son, and she has assured him that when she dies he will inherit everything she has.

Only God's love, only God's way could make that possible.

It is possible to love your enemies. Jesus has shown us how. He has given us these 5 steps to help us, He has given us the Cross, and he has filled us with the Holy Spirit to enable us to have total forgiveness. Love your enemies.

Lets pray

Lord we thank you so much today for your amazing love for us, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Revealed to us on the cross. Help us Lord to in our hearts respond to these words of Jesus. Give us the power to live out what Jesus commands us to do - to love our enemies. In Jesus name Amen.