

“The Art Of Solving Conflicts”

Acts 11:1-18

Series: Book of Acts [#15]

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Theme: **Solving Conflicts Requires Keeping Focused On God’s Truth.**

Introduction

This morning we pick up Luke’s account in Acts 11. Peter has just completed a tour of churches on the coast. During this time God also used Him to clarify that the gospel is for all people on an equal basis. That is, Gentiles do not need to become Jewish or adopt Jewish practices.

But all was not well. The word of these dramatic events raced back to Jerusalem. Some of the Jewish believers there took issue with Peter for his association with Gentiles.

Welcome to *Conflict*. None of us are strangers to it. We may hate it and try to avoid it at almost any cost, but we still encounter it.

Sometimes it seems as though conflicts are just waiting to happen. A soloist was singing at a concert. One man whispered to the man next to him, “What a terrible voice! Do you know who she is?” “Yes,” the man answered, “she’s my wife.” The first man said, “I’m sorry. It’s really not her voice you know, but that *stuff* she has to sing. I wonder who wrote that awful music.” “I did,” the other man replied. *Ouch!*

What do we do when conflicts arise? How do we respond? Ignoring or glossing over them doesn’t work. Outwitting the other person or winning a debate doesn’t really solve it either. As we look at this section of Scripture we can learn something about “*The Art Of Solving Conflicts*.” A basic and vital principle here is that *solving conflicts requires keeping focused on God’s truth*.

Conflicts often begin when someone says or does something which offends another person. The offended person feels like jumping to his or her feet and shouting “*I object!*”

“I Object!”

Each day we object to some things ...

- styles of music, clothes, driving;
- favoritism and the unfair use of influence;
- rules which people invent and rigidly apply to others;
- immoral values being flagrantly promoted.

Sometimes objecting is the response God expects from us. Everything is to be screened by the truth of the Bible. As well, we are to look at the motives, spirit behind and quality of ideas, directions and those who hold them. 1 John 4:1 tells us “... do not believe every spirit,

but test the spirits to see whether they are from God ...”

An important question at this point is, “When and where can I, should I object? How can I know?” There are two specific, helpful filters or guidelines from this conflict in Acts 11.

The first is to watch out for sacred cows. Look at the start of the chapter,

“Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him ...” (11:1-2)

Here we come face to face with a *sacred cow*. That is, something which a person sees as essential and vital, but actually is not. Sacred cows are things which I think others are not to criticize, challenge or change, even though they are not absolute according to God’s Word.

Peter had stayed with Gentiles, ate with them, shared the gospel and accepted them when they believed. First, notice that Peter was not criticized for ...

- preaching the gospel to Gentiles;
- nor for the Gentiles believing the gospel and placing their faith in Jesus Christ;
- nor yet for having these new believers baptized.

No. Peter’s critics did not raise these things. Their issue was that he stayed and ate with those Gentiles. This was their issue. His actions violated their *sacred cow* of separation and superiority that had been deeply ingrained in them since childhood.

In fact, the Law of Moses did *not* forbid Jews to stay and eat with Gentiles. This was an added Jewish tradition. It seemed both logical and necessary to them. After all, if you stayed and ate with Gentiles you might eat unclean food. Some of the believers in Jerusalem wanted to keep observing many of the Jewish practices of the Law and traditions, and make them mandatory for *all* believers. “After all,” they would say, “They are essential! They are required!”

By the time we get to chapter 15, some of these hardline traditionalists had organized. When Paul and Baranabas were at Antioch, Luke tells us,

“Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’” (15:1)

They thought and taught this way in spite of ...

- Jesus’ teaching which reached out to all;
- in spite of the veil of the temple being torn open by God;
- in spite of God’s confirmation of accepting first the Samaritans and then Gentiles on

the basis of faith in Jesus alone.

They believed they had to continue keeping the Law and traditions. They couldn't see any other option. These things were a *sacred cow* to them—not to be criticized or challenged. And certainly not to be changed!

Now, it is much easier to see someone else's *sacred cows* than our own. Think of just a few areas:

- church services: how many, style, starting time, length;
- then, the traditions of what we do and how we do it. Now, traditions are fine and can be very helpful. Jamie told us last evening at the *Around the World in Music* program that the Sherwood Park Cowboy Church has a tradition of closing with *I'll Fly Away*. When one service didn't close with it, it just wasn't the same. Now, that kind of tradition is fine. But when our traditions become hardened concrete, they have become a herd of sacred concrete cows.
- Then there are our interpretations and applications of Scripture that we can hold to as firmly as the Scripture itself. At the 1870 annual conference of the Methodists of Indiana, the President of the college hosting the meeting told the people, "I think we are living in a very exciting age." The presiding bishop asked him, "What do you see for the future?" The college president responded, "A time of great inventions. For example, man will fly through the air like birds!" The bishop quickly interrupted, "Nonsense! Heresy! We'll have no more such talk here." After the conference the bishop, bishop Wright, went home and told his family about these *preposterous* ideas. His two young boys *Wilbur and Orville*, took it all in. And we know something about *Wilbur & Orville Wright* and people flying through the air, don't we.

When you see or hear something that is different, new, surprising or shocking, and you feel like jumping up and shouting "*I object!*" Pause. Think. Screen your feelings and thoughts for *sacred cows*. Solving conflicts requires keeping focused on God's truth.

The second filter to apply is to watch out for is majoring on minors. Majoring on minors is a cousin to *sacred cows*. Majoring on a minor is focusing on something that may be true and good, but not the most important thing.

Jesus scolded the Pharisees for doing that. Luke 11:42,

"But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithe of mint and rue and every kind of garden herb, and yet disregard justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others."

Let's review the opening verses of this chapter once more. Peter's critics heard that the Gentiles "had received the word of God" (1). Their criticism, again, was that Peter "went to [these] uncircumcised men and ate with them" (3). Where was their focus? On God saving people from sin and death and bringing them into holiness and life with Himself? No.

It was on the possibility that Peter may have made himself ceremonially unclean. “Peter, how could you even think of doing such a thing?” They were focusing on their traditions rather than the eternal destiny of others. Now, that’s *majoring on minors*.

Do we ever major on minors? As you think about that, begin with yourself. “Do I ever major on minors?” Majoring on minors is pettiness. Listen to some strong words on this from one writer.

“Petty people are ugly people. They are people who have lost their vision. They are people who have turned their eyes away from what matters and focused instead on what doesn’t matter. The result is that the rest of us are immobilized by their obsession with the insignificant. It is time to rid the church of pettiness ... It is time the church stopped ignoring pettiness ... a serious disease ... which continues to result in terminal cases of discord, disruption and destruction.”

(Wittenberg Door, 1984)

Another person wrote from a lighter perspective, “If people concentrated on the really important things in life, there’d be a shortage of fishing poles.”

Conflicts come. When you feel like jumping up and shouting, “I object!”, watch out for *sacred cows* and *majoring on minors*. The prevention and cure is God’s word. Solving conflicts requires keeping focused on God’s truth.

Now let’s shift to the other side. When you are under attack for bumping into someone’s sacred cow, or are the victim of someone majoring on minors, how do you respond? You may want to shout “I’m innocent.” You may want to stand up and say, “Listen to me. At least let me speak in my defense.”

“In My Defense.”

First, keep calm and collected. Put yourself in Peter’s place. He was a traditional, faithful Jewish man. God gave him that dramatic vision recorded in chapter 10 to break through his traditionalism. At first Peter protested, “By no means Lord!” Going to Caesarea and into the house of a Gentile who was a Roman military officer was not his idea. Neither was he about to volunteer for such a mission on his own. God dramatically directed him to take this bold step.

Now he comes back to Jerusalem and he’s called on the carpet! All his traditionalist buddies are on his case. Talk about being treated unfairly, about being attacked for sticking your neck out, Peter was experiencing it in full blast surround sound. We might have expected Peter’s natural quick temper to surface here, but it didn’t. If it had, there could have been a major blow up and break up of the church in Jerusalem.

How did Peter respond? Look at verse 4, “...Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence ...” He *kept calm and collected*.

This is a very important lesson for us. When you brush up against someone's sacred cow, or when you are called on the carpet by someone who is majoring on minors, how do you respond? It's easy for the blood pressure to spike, the heart and mouth to pump at top speed. "Who are they? What do they know? They should talk! I'll tell them a thing or two! I'll put them in their place!" When you make your defense "keep calm and collected."

Secondly, stick to the facts. Peter gave an orderly, factual report in verses 5-15. He began by recounting his experience of praying, receiving the vision and command, and also his objection. Then he described the messengers coming, his going with them to Caesarea, and his initial contact with Cornelius. From there he moved to his preaching, the Holy Spirit working in the hearts of those people, and then his directing that they be baptized.

Think of what Peter did not say.

- He did not begin with excuses ... "I was hungry, it was hot, perhaps I was a bit faint. I'm not really all that sure, but my blood sugar may have been out of balance."
- Nor did he give a detailed character reference for Cornelius, including the balance sheet of his generous giving at the temple. In fact, he didn't even mention his name in this account.
- Peter didn't say, "Why pick on me? There were six other men with me?"
- He didn't resort to authority to shut them up, "Remember who you are talking to! I'm an apostle!"
- Nor did he try a dramatic play on their emotions.

Peter stuck to the facts.

When responding in a conflict, stick to the facts. There are the easy and obvious things to avoid. An employer asked one of his workers, "Do you believe in life after death?" Puzzled, the young man simply said, "Yes." "Then that makes everything fine," his boss said. "About an hour after you left yesterday to attend your grandfather's funeral, he came in to see you." We can laugh at that.

But when the issue is real and serious, even when you know you are correct, it might be tempting to advance your case with a bit of selective sharing, stretching or overstating a point here or there, trying to shift the focus to something else. When you are in a conflict, *stick to the facts*.

Sometimes conflicts are smoothed over but not really resolved even though the fighting stops. This incident gives us pictures of two *proofs of a God-honoring solution* to conflicts.

The Proof Of A God-Honoring Resolution.

First, the arguing does stop. Drop down to verse 18, "When they heard this [i.e., Peter's matter of fact statement], they quieted down..." (18a). Literally, "they became quiet." Picture the scene. It began with low whispers, people quietly, carefully talking to each other.

Then there were public statements and questions. Next, others chimed in. And soon it was like Question Period in the House of Commons.

But we get to this point and a sudden hush falls over the group. No one could deny God's truth and this specific work of God in Caesarea. It was clear. A God-honoring solution is not

- one side out-pointing the other, winning the debate;
- it is not one person overpowering another;
- it is not a compromise basically to have a compromise and just an end to the conflict.

These actions are only a temporary and partial silencing of the conflict. You don't have real peace, a real solution just because you have silenced the other side. It is when the love and truth of God come together and the *arguing truly stops* that you have a God-honoring resolution to conflict.

But there is more proof of a God-honoring resolution. It takes place when praise to God begins. Let's look at verse 18 again,

“When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, ‘Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.’”

A God-honoring resolution is not just a cessation of conflict, but also includes people on all sides truly praising God together. It is impossible for people to truly praise God together and argue with each other at the same time.

The focus now was not on Peter (who *was* right on this) or the traditionalists (who *were* wrong on this), but on God. On what God had done. What a vital lesson! Focusing on God, His truth, love and work leads to fellowship and praise while focussing on self leads to conflict and fractured relationships.

Conclusion.

“*The Art Of Solving Conflicts.*” Solving conflicts requires keeping focused on God's truth.

Let's put this into perspective of our world today. The article was titled *Leader Leaves Anglican Church*. The subtitle, *Theologian quits over move to gay marriage*. Dr. James Packer, a well known and influential theologian, recently quit the Anglican Church of Canada over what he characterized as an “arguably heretical” trend toward “poisonous liberalism.” He said he could no longer serve under the Vancouver area Bishop who he said “appears heretical.”

Sometimes you cannot resolve a conflict. In Romans 12:18 Paul tells us, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” We need to stand firmly without compromise for the clear teaching of the Bible. We cannot be faithful to God and compromise on that. We cannot be faithful to God and look the other way or give any implicit support for false teaching by being associated with it.

This is critical. Much of the evangelical church today has lost the dedication to truth and the courage Dr. Packer has displayed.

Having said this, let me also say just as emphatically, that most of our conflicts are not issues of essential Biblical truth. James opened chapter 4 of his letter with a question and answer, “What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?” Our own desires and preferences which we think are right, which we think are better than those of others, give rise to conflict. Yes, our sacred cows and majoring on minors.

Churches have split over the color of the new carpet. Yes, *churches*—sadly, many more than one. One pastor relates that when his church began reaching out to hippies in the late 60s, some members of the church got upset because when the hippies came into the church they were getting the brand new carpet dirty.

Solving conflicts requires keeping focused on God’s truth. As we close now by spending some time personally and quietly reflecting with God, think about your attitude and responses to conflict.

- Do you have any sacred cows? Do you sometimes major on minors?
- How do you respond when you bump into someone’s sacred cow or are hit in the tidal wave from another person’s majoring on minors?
- Do you really strive to live at peace with everyone, as much as it depends on you?
- Do you have the faith and courage to stand tall and true to God’s truth?

Determine to keep focused on God’s truth and practice the art of solving conflicts.

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