

Understanding Conflict

2 Corinthians 5:18-20

My family smile (patiently) or tap their fingers on the dashboard (not so patiently and say, "Here we go again!") when I drive to shopping centre car parks. You see, I park as far away from other cars as I can, after years scratches, dings, dents and other doozies somehow attacking my car whilst I'm shopping. Hands up if you can relate to this.

There's a classic example of this and of someone boiling over in an episode of *Malcolm in the Middle*, a US TV show from a few years back.



The scene is a busy and full shopping centre carpark, and a person returns to their car with their Christmas shopping, only to notice that the person in the car parked next to them opens their door and scratches the car. And the person whose car has been scratched says something expecting an apology from the other person. But instead she gets a biting sarcastic comment, "Well, it clearly wouldn't make any difference to the value of your car." Well, one bad turn leads to another, and before you know it things

escalate dramatically, and the cars are ramming one another on the way out of the carpark! Both shoppers' blood is boiling, and they're determined to extract justice and revenge; and the scene ends with both cars as wrecks and the drivers hell-bent on destruction.

(You can see the 3-minute clip from *Malcolm in the Middle* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqqKEgrPhHo>)

We smile knowingly, and also wriggle uncomfortably in our seats, because we know — oh so well — the trail of destruction that we find on a path that moves from self-righteous anger or indignation (how could that person do that to me or my car door, and not even apologise?) to seeking our own retribution and taking an adversarial, aggressive, revenge-at-all-costs approach to another in time of conflict. There are no winners and we end up beaten up and broken up, and don't even recognise it until it's too late.

As Paul reminds us so clearly in his letter to the Galatians, "The entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other." (Gal 5:14, 15)

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Just think at the wrecks of the people I described in the episode of *Malcolm in the Middle*.

To say that something is terribly wrong is to state the bleedin' obvious. I'm pretty sure I can say that we all know and can relate to situations of disagreement, complaint, and conflict which have gone this horribly wrong way.

I know that I am probably referring to extreme cases, but there are families broken, generations of people in family, community, even in God's church, where people don't speak to one another after generations, over a conflict they don't even understand from a previous generation.

My friends, this should not be so. And our God has a better way. The way of the cross... the way of Christ... of forgiveness, because we have been and are forgiven.

Over five weeks, we'll be focusing in the sermon time and in our Bible readings on working through conflict in God's way.

St Paul writes to the Christians at Corinth:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ. (2 Corinthians 5:16-20)

We are new! We are newly minted each day as a baptised, Easter-new creation in Christ. Stop. Take a breath and breathe that reality in for a moment. And as such, we are called and have the gift from God, through the presence of Christ and by power of the Holy Spirit, to do God's Easter creating work through the granting of forgiveness, and restoring people in Christ.

As a community, we're embarking on a sermon series and Bible study called "Blessed are the Peacemakers". I believe we're embarking on focused time to learn and grow in Christ in being the new creation we are.

The first study is called *Understanding Conflict*. The study is designed to help us to consider what causes conflict, and how we as Christians might respond. And whilst we know, only too well, how we all *want* to respond in a way that is healthy and brings God's peace, we also know the struggle we face when we, or someone we love, or something we love, are damaged, and that we can often respond totally inappropriately, and escalate the situation.

James puts it this way:

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?

Sin still remains at work... even in me and you... in us!

If God wanted to escalate the punishment we face because of sin, the wreck of humanity would be such an awful sight. But that's not God's way. It's not God.

For God so loved the world... for God so loves you and me and everyone... that he gave his only Son to die so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have life... life

For God so loved
the world ...
you and me
and everyone ...



that he gave his only Son to die so that
whoever believes in him shall not perish but
have life ... life eternal, life to the full.
That's God's way.

eternal... life to the full. *That's God's way.*

Through the gift of forgiveness and life in the waters of baptism, we are new creation... God's new creation!

And so we live in. God's new way... the way of forgiveness. We are, in fact, God's ambassadors of reconciliation.

In addressing conflict and sin, God chose the way of reconciliation. We can too.

Study I of *Blessed are the Peacemakers* introduces four principles for us to consider when we are involved in conflict:

1. **Glorify God:** We can ask ourselves, "How can I glorify God and give witness to what Christ has done for me, in this situation?"
2. **Get the log out of your eye:** We can ask ourselves, "How have I contributed to this situation, to this conflict, and what do I need to do to address and help resolve it?"
3. **Gently restore:** How can I help others to understand how I feel about how they have contributed to the conflict, so that our relationship can healthily be restored?
4. **Go and be reconciled:** How can I demonstrate forgiveness and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict?

These so called "4 G's" can help us look to Christ when we are in situations of conflict. And in looking to Christ, we can grow to be who we are: ambassadors of God's reconciliation. It doesn't mean we are called to be 'door mats' to be walked all over. Rather we are called to call out conflict and bring peace, because ultimately peace comes through one source; the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We can learn and grow to be peacemakers, ambassadors of reconciliation, because in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting our sins against us and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

So, whether or not I'll change my parking habits at shopping centres remains to be seen. Nah, I probably won't. It will be hard at times to respond to conflict in the best way. But in Christ we look forward to growing, to changing, as new creation to becoming God's ambassadors of reconciliation.

Amen.

Video of the service including the above sermon: <https://youtu.be/MaQTSV-GrvA>