

# Conflict

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we're going to turn now to our Bibles, and Paul is, as you know, leading us through some of the great wisdom of the Lord in the book of Proverbs. And we're looking this evening at the whole issue of dealing with conflict.

We're going to read Proverbs chapter 17. As usual, we'll be moving around, I'm sure, to other places in the book, but there's a lot in this particular chapter to make us think about these things.

So Proverbs chapter 17, and if you don't have a Bible, there's a Bible scattered about the building at the sides and at the front, and do grab one before Paul comes to speak, and it'll be very helpful, so you can follow on.

Proverbs 17, then, at verse 1. Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife. A servant who deals wisely will rule over a son who acts shamefully, and will share the inheritance as one of the brothers.

The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and the Lord tests hearts. An evildoer listens to wicked lips, and a liar gives ear to a mischievous tongue.

[ 1 : 17 ] Whoever mocks the poor insults his maker. He who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished. Grandchildren are the crown of the aged.

Well, not all the new grandparents here want to be considered aged, but there we are. That's what the Bible says. Bad luck. Anyway, grandchildren are the crown of the aged, and the glory of children is their fathers.

Fine speech is not becoming to a fool. Still less is false speech to a prince.

A bribe is like a magic stone in the eyes of the one who gives it. Wherever he turns, he prospers. Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.

A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool. An evil man seeks only rebellion, and a cruel messenger will be sent against him.

[ 2 : 32 ] Let a man meet a she-bear robbed of her cubs rather than a fool in his folly. If anyone returns evil for good, evil will not depart from his house.

The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so quit before the quarrel breaks out. He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous, both alike are an abomination to the Lord.

Why should a fool have money in his hand to buy wisdom when he has no sense? A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.

One who lacks sense gives a pledge and puts up security in the presence of his neighbor. Whoever loves transgression loves strife.

He who made his door high seeks destruction. A man of crooked heart does not discover good. And one with a dishonest tongue falls into calamity.

[ 3 : 44 ] He who sires a fool gets himself sorrow. And the father of a fool has no joy. A joyful heart is good medicine.

But a crushed spirit dries up the bones. The wicked accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the ways of justice.

The discerning sets his face towards wisdom. But the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth. A foolish son is a grief to his father.

And bitterness to her who bore him. To impose a fine on a righteous man is not good. Nor to strike the noble for their uprightness.

Whoever restrains his words has knowledge. And he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.

[ 4 : 45 ] Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise. When he closes his lips, he's deemed intelligent. Amen.

May God bless to us his word. What a lot of things to ponder in that chapter. Good. Well, good evening to you.

And please do turn your Bibles to Proverbs. And as Willie said, we'll be dotting around a wee bit through the book of Proverbs. But a good place to have open would be chapter 17, which was read earlier.

But we're thinking this evening about what Proverbs would say to us about conflict. About conflict. Now, conflict is a present reality in our lives and sometimes in our churches.

Although conflict is ultimately, of course, a consequence of the fall, it sometimes arises, as we'll see through the book of Proverbs, from misunderstandings, assumptions, or poor communication.

[ 5 : 53 ] And whilst conflict is not something we should strive for, clearly, we must recognize that sometimes God, in his providence, uses conflict as a way to achieve lasting peace, purity, and unity in the church, in our families, in our relationships.

Even in his earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus brought conflict in order to purify his church, to bring about salvation and peace for his people.

There is a right sort of conflict, where issues that cannot be ignored or dealt with, in such a way as to bring about real resolution and restoration, and where relationships have been fracturing and straining, there is restoration.

Sometimes conflict is necessary. But there is also a sort of conflict that is sinful and destructive, and if left unchecked, can be disastrous.

And it's that sort of conflict that Proverbs talks much about, and which will be the focus of our time this evening. It is the destructive, sinful sort of conflict that we're thinking about tonight.

[ 7 : 12 ] Not particularly the sort of necessary, restorative conflict that must happen, but rather the negative, the one that leads to fracture and disintegration.

And regrettably, this sort of conflict is present in our lives and in the church. The Apostle Paul had to deal with this sort of thing from time to time.

You can read about it in his letter to the Philippian church. He says there, at the side of chapter 4, I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.

Help these women who have laboured side by side with me in the gospel. Clearly there's some sort of conflict going on, and the Apostle Paul publicly has to deal with it.

We must be real and recognise that conflicts, arguments, fallings out, are a present reality in the church and in this church. Just think about the sheer number of relationships that we have in this church.

[ 8 : 20 ] At the moment, we have a membership of 435 people. 436, sorry, that's wrong. We've got 436 members. Do you know how many distinct relationships there are with that number of people?

Well, my good friend Alejandro crunched the numbers for me. And there are almost 95,000 discrete relationships with a congregation like ours.

If we get another 25 people joining our church later on in the spring, the number of distinct relationships grows to 106,000. That is a lot of relationships. That's a lot of complexity and a lot of possible sources of conflict.

Not that we should shrug our shoulders and say, oh, conflict's inevitable. It's just going to happen. Well, no, conflict is unbecoming and something we ought to strive to avoid and repair where possible because, as we'll see, it can be deeply damaging.

Conflict between two individuals in a church has consequences beyond those two individuals. How could it not? We are a body being built together.

[ 9 : 34 ] If two of our members are falling out, then that impacts everybody else in one way or another. It could be deeply damaging. And so we need to heed the warnings and the wisdom we're about to hear from the book of Proverbs.

But at the same time, we must hold intention that not all conflicts will be resolved in this world. We must be realistic and remember that we live in a fallen world and the church will always be operating in a fallen world with fallen people and we'll do so until Christ returns.

There are some conflicts that will just never be resolved in this world. We must be realistic about that as well. So there are sometimes wounds that are just too deep, too sore, and we must be realistic about that.

But we're going to consider tonight the fruit of conflict, the source of conflict, and the avoidance of conflict. That's where we're going to see them. Let's start with the fruit. The rotten fruit of conflict.

Proverbs 14, verse 14. The backslider in heart will be filled with the fruit of his ways. And a good man will be filled with the fruit of his ways, says Proverbs.

[ 10 : 56 ] That establishes the basic point that our ways, how we live, the sort of person we are, has significant causal effect with the fruit of our lives.

The backslider in heart will produce the fruit in keeping with that. Both the fool and the wise will enjoy the fruit of their ways, good fruit or rotten fruit.

And one given to conflict will reap the rewards. And the fruit of conflict is rotten. Listen to these verses and notice the output of conflict and disagreements.

More particularly, what you see here is the fruit of the person who creates conflict that's in view. Conflict isn't some sort of contained issue over there in a little box.

It's always wrapped up with people. Conflict is tied up with people and relationships. So really, we're considering the fruit of a person who is given to conflict.

[ 12 : 00 ] What results in the conflict created by such a person? Well, listen to these verses. A dishonest man spreads strife.

And a whisperer separates close friends. 16, verse 28. See, strife impacts the whole community. It spreads like a contagious disease.

It spreads sowing discord. A whisperer separates close friends. Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife.

That's the first verse we read this evening. Chapter 17, verse 1. Strife is present, not peace. And so unpleasant is the strife that it's better to be eating stale bread than to be in a house full of the best food that waitrose produces.

If a wise man has an argument with a fool, the fool only rages and laughs and there's no quiet.

[ 13 : 09 ] See the fruit of conflict there? Raging, coarse laughter, no quiet. And for the person who is at the source of the conflict, there will be a terrible price to pay.

Chapter 6 says this. A worthless person, a wicked man, goes about with crooked speech, winks with his eye, signals with his feet, points with his finger, with perverted heart devises evil, continually sowing discord.

Therefore calamity will come upon him suddenly. In a moment he'll be broken beyond healing. So do not be surprised if you go about with crooked speech, stirring up trouble, sowing discord, if suddenly things do not go well.

You're warned. Calamity may come upon you suddenly. The overall picture in Proverbs is not an encouraging one. Conflict produces rotten fruit.

Conflict produces no quiet, disagreements, quarreling, coarse laughter, raging, calamity. Conflict produces rotten fruit.

[ 14 : 27 ] And a church where conflict is present and unchallenged. It will be a rotten church. There's the fruit. What about the source?

What's the source of conflict? Well, the immediate source of conflict is, of course, our words. Have a look at chapter 17. We've got that open there. Verse 9. Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.

You may have been wronged by somebody. Or it may just be you feel wronged by someone. And you've got two choices. You can act wisely or foolishly.

The wise, first half of verse 9, seek to dampen down the conflict, to cover over the offense, to resolve to deal with it quietly and without fuss. The second half of verse 9, the fool, they will repeat the matter to anyone who will listen under the guise of sharing their burden or seeking to have the matter resolved.

What you're actually doing is lining up people on your side and perhaps separating close friends. Conflict is created and exacerbated by our words.

[ 15 : 51 ] But listen to the very next verse, which demonstrates the nuances that Proverbs insists we must reckon with. Having just urged restraint and care when it comes to our words, we read in verse 10, a rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows to a fool.

So this verse is ensuring that we don't misread the previous one and think that what it's advocating is sweeping sin under the carpet. Now we just don't talk about it, we just ignore it.

No, no, the wise person doesn't gossip, but they do rebuke the wrongful person. There is a sort of conflict which is good and which is restorative.

Wise words spoken to the right people in the right way, but foolish words spoken to the wrong people in the wrong way creates the wrong sort of conflict. That's the tension you're getting in verses 9 and 10.

Sometimes restraint, you don't say anything, but other times you really must say something. You must rebuke. You must enter into conflict. Look at verse 4 of chapter 17.

[ 17 : 05 ] It's not just the words that we say that lead to conflict, but also the words we give time to listen to. An evildoer listens to wicked lips, and a liar gives ear to a mischievous tongue.

So giving an attentive ear to someone who stirs up conflict and strife not only enables them to spread those lies and discord, but it fills your mind with those lies and destructive words which you may then go on to repeat.

So it's not just the words we speak, but the words we're willing to listen to. Words are the immediate causes of conflict, but more fundamentally, the source of those words that leads to conflict is a person.

It comes down again to the very heart of the matter in Proverbs. Are you a wise or a foolish person? The wise are not generally going to be the source of division.

The foolish, however, as we see in Proverbs, again and again, spread strife and sow discord. Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.

[ 18 : 16 ] Chapter 10, verse 12. See, the real source of conflict there is hatred within our hearts. But love, love covers offense.

See, it's from within, from the heart, that words come. And some with hatred in their heart will produce strife. You observe a conflict in the church.

You see a falling out between friends. Look beyond the presenting issue, the presenting conflicts, and you must know there are deeper issues present. There is hatred in people's hearts rather than love.

That's at the root of it. Chapter 13. In everything, the prudent acts with knowledge, but a fool flaunts his folly.

chapter 15. A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention. See, the source of conflict is a person and the sort of person that person is.

[ 19 : 23 ] The source of any conflict is a living, breathing human being, someone who thinks and feels, someone who gladly submits to the Lord or grudgingly goes through the motions.

And many of the realities that are the source of conflict are hidden away. We can hide things quite easily, can't we? But it's in our hearts, that's where the source of conflict erupts.

And we need to know that. When there's a conflict, there's more bubbling away beneath the surface than we realize. We need to remember the source of conflict that Proverbs insists we must always consider.

At the root of conflict are people and people who are fools, people who harbor hatred, people who are hot-tempered. The source of conflict is the human heart.

And we'll return to that later. But that is the ultimate source, isn't it? It's our hearts. Are we wise? Or are we foolish?

[ 20 : 28 ] And of course, the wise man in Proverbs is one who submits to the Lord, not perfectly, it's not about knowledge, is it? It's about a general direction in life seeking to serve the Lord.

That's the fundamental reality. The source of conflict is the human heart. Third key thing this evening, it's our final thing, the avoidance.

The avoidance of conflict. Now the first thing we must say is that we must be realistic about ourselves and about our own hearts. we need to take responsibility for ourselves first and foremost that we might actually be the cause of a conflict.

I might be the problem here. The scriptures are often an unflattering mirror, aren't they? They hold up reality and we see ourselves as we really are. We're shown our true selves through the scriptures.

And perhaps we've realized, actually, I'm the problem here. I'm the source of the conflict. And if that's so, then be assured there is hope.

[ 21 : 33 ] You see, our sin, once we've realized and come to terms with it, well, we must confess it, seek the Lord's forgiveness, and then seek to restore the relationship that's been fractured.

and if possible, find restoration. So we must take responsibility for ourselves, for our own sin, for the conflict we've caused. But having said that, there is much wisdom in Proverbs as to how we might mitigate against conflict in the fellowship of God's people, in our own families, in our relationships more broadly, perhaps your workplace, or the wider family.

There is much wisdom for how we might avoid unnecessary conflict. And there are five things in Proverbs, well, there's more than that, but here's five.

Five things that Proverbs would have us grasp as we think about conflict avoidance. Now, don't mishear me. This is not saying that we must avoid all conflict.

Some conflicts are necessary. Sometimes hard words must be spoken. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, says Proverbs. It can sometimes hurt, to be honest.

[ 22 : 49 ] But a true friend, a true fellow church member, church leader, may need to speak a truth that's hard to hear. They may have to say something very painful in order to rescue you from the error of your way.

So that sort of conflict is good and right. But here are five things to ponder when it comes to unnecessary, sinful conflict that is destructive. Number one, remove the key elements of combustion.

Remove the key elements of combustion. In the same way that a fire needs heat, oxygen, and fuel to burn, there are key elements that conflict needs in order to thrive.

And Proverbs is pretty blunt about eliminating some of those key elements. chapter 26, for lack of wood, the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.

Chapter 22, drive out a scoffer, and strife will go out, and quarreling and abuse will cease. If there is strife and conflict, and it's been traced back to a particular individual, they refuse to repent, they persist in their whispering, then I think Proverbs would say they need to be removed.

[ 24 : 16 ] Do that, and you'll find peace is restored. Now you'll see this principle with wise football managers. I think the most high profile example of late was Cristiano Ronaldo and Manchester United.

Now I'm a fan of both. I'm the same age of Ronaldo, would you believe it? He's now past his peak. Luckily, mine's still ahead of me. But he was stirring up trouble.

You can't have missed it. Controversy and conflict with his words in various interviews. He was saying some pretty explosive things about the club. And quite rightly, the manager, Eric Ten Hag, was having none of it.

Ronaldo was shown the door. The most famous, most expensive, most well-paid footballer in history, shown the door. And since he's gone, United have gone from strength to strength.

If he'd been allowed to stay, then the rot would have festered and destroyed the team. Likewise, in a church, the failure to deal with someone who stirs up trouble, the someone who stirs up conflict in a church, a failure to deal with that will only lead to more trouble and disaster.

[ 25 : 36 ] As Derek Kidner writes, what an institution sometimes needs is not reform, but the expulsion of a member. But that must be done with great care.

Listen to this. Back in chapter 17, verse 14. The beginning of strife is like letting out water or breaching a dam.

So quit before the quarrel breaks out. If a dam breaks, prepare for chaos and carnage. If you are about to tackle the person at the source of a conflict, brace yourself.

Entering a dispute, challenging this sort of person, ought to be done at a last resort. We must weigh our motives carefully. Ensure we're as informed about the facts as we can be.

So it's not advocating that people go around throwing their weight, demanding this person gets thrown out, this person gets thrown out. Absolutely not. But what it is saying is that sometimes, and hopefully very, very occasionally, sometimes the necessary thing to do for the good of the whole community is that the scoffer, the whisperer, the person at the root of conflicts is removed.

[ 27 : 03 ] That's the first thing. Sometimes we must eliminate the source of combustion. Second, watch your words. Watch your words. chapter 10, verse 19, when words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.

The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable, but the mouth of the wicked what is perverse. With his mouth, the godless man would destroy his neighbor, but by knowledge the righteous is delivered.

Chapter 12, the vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult. The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.

Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. I could read a whole bunch more, but the key thing, notice that the wise man and the fool may have similar thoughts going through their heads, but the fool can't help but say what he's thinking.

Whatever comes into the fool's head, whatever agitation, whatever grievance, fool vent is given. The fool blurts out, but the wise man knows better.

[ 28 : 33 ] The wise man knows better than to externalize his every thought and ponders before he speaks. The wise man considers, maybe I don't know everything.

When words are many, conflict will follow. Restraint lets matters cool and allows for proper perspective to reinstate itself.

Proverbs again and again would say, watch your words, especially words uttered in the heat of the moment. It's better to say nothing at all. That's the second thing, watch your words.

Third, know whom you speak to. Know who it is you're speaking to. Chapter 9, verse 7, whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse.

And he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury. Do not reprove a scoffer or he will hate you. Reprove a wise man and he will love you.

[ 29 : 42 ] Give instruction to a wise man and he will be still wiser. Teach a righteous man and he will increase in learning. Or chapter 29, verse 9, if a wise man has an argument with a fool, the fool only rages and laughs and there is no quiet.

Know who it is you speak to. Conflict is a likely consequence if the person you're speaking to is a fool. You crack the scoffer and everything blows up.

Correct a wise man and he'll thank you. He'll love you. He'll grow wiser. And so we need to be able to discern the people to whom we speak.

Are they a fool or are they wise? You may very well have an entirely legitimate issue to raise with someone but to do so may actually cause more harm than good.

A conflict out of all proportion to the original issue may erupt because the person you intend to deal with is actually a fool. Prudent restraint may dictate that the less that is said the better.

[ 31 : 00 ] Saying something like recollections may vary may be the wise thing to do. So have a realistic assessment of the person you're dealing with and you may avoid a conflict.

Know to whom you speak. Number four pick your battles. Pick your battles. Chapter 26 verse 17 Whoever meddles in a quarrel that's not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears.

When two people are having a quarrel it really can have a very significant impact on those around them. Those in their growth group or serving team or congregation.

There can be the temptation for you to sort of don your busy body persona and wade in and take sides and sort it all out. It's very hard not to align yourself with the person you know best.

factions and allegiances may form enemies multiply it can all get very messy. I've never tried this but I don't advise you do either but don't grab a dog by the ears there's a good chance you're going to get nibbles.

[ 32 : 17 ] Likewise says Proverbs if you get involved in a quarrel not your own you're going to get hurt. You're going to get bitten. A wise person will hold back suspend judgment knowing that they don't possess all the facts and they will rather encourage the warring parties to reconcile sort out between yourselves.

There may come a time to get involved of course but pick your battles. Number five last one choose your company carefully choose your company carefully 13 verse 20 whoever walks with the wise becomes wise but the companion of fools will suffer harm.

One of the best ways to avoid conflict is to grow in wisdom and one key way to grow in wisdom is to surround yourself with wise people seek them out. If you're a student or young worker or young married or young family then find wise people the next stage on from you in life spend time with them seek their friendship.

it works the other way too. Consider those in the life stage younger than you and how can you invest in them and pass on wisdom to them. 14 verse 7 would say leave the presence of a fool for there you do not meet words of knowledge.

Seek the wise flee the fool. If you realize you've been spending too much time with a fool politely exit stage left. don't somehow imagine that you'll rub off on them that can be naive.

[ 33 : 56 ] Often it's the other way around the effect operates the other way you'll be dragged into fool them. So think about who you spend time with. There's five things that will help us in general to avoid conflict.

Remove the key elements of combustion watch your words note to whom you speak pick your battles choose your company carefully. Now those will all be helpful but we will still find ourselves in the midst of conflicts that are damaging and which ought to have been avoided or at least handled better.

What do we do if we realize we've sinned and we're responsible for conflict or perhaps we've been sinned against? We're in a conflict and we want to get out.

Running or hiding from the conflict is not the righteous option for the Christian. If you're in conflict with another Christian you are commanded to attempt to resolve the conflict in a godly manner.

We're told in scriptures, aren't we, Matthew chapter five, we're to work it out before we come to church, resolve that conflict. And part of that is taking responsibility for the log in our own eye.

[ 35 : 11 ] The natural tendency is for us to minimize our own culpability and the issue and to maximize the other persons. But seeing our own sin requires humility and wisdom.

And once we've done that, we need to remember that what we are seeking to achieve is resolving the conflict, bringing about restoration. The point is not to score points or to justify ourselves.

It's not to see to it that the other person feels as much pain as you've had. it's not to get your story out there or to stir up others against that brother or sister in the church. It's not for the purpose of getting them removed from the church.

No, the purpose in it all is restoration. Perhaps we need to confess to them our sin, to seek their forgiveness, to seek restoration. Or we may need to confront the one who has sinned against us and provide them with an opportunity to repent, to be freed from their guilt.



we confront for the purpose of restoration. We confront to restore peace and righteousness in the church. And that is the great goal because conflict can devastate a church if left unchecked.

[ 36 : 31 ] Paul tells the Ephesians, walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.

church life is not always easy. And as we seek to live godly lives in Christ Jesus, there will, from time to time, be unwholesome conflict.

And the devil loves to divide God's church, and so he must guard against him, giving him no foothold in church life, no grounds for conflict to erupt and spread like gangrene.

Let's not have it. Beware the warnings of Proverbs. Conflict is disastrous. So let us heed Christ's wisdom, which we read this evening in Proverbs.

Let us seek, where possible, to drive out conflict and to seek to live in love and peace together. Let's ask the Lord to help us, shall we? Let's pray. Father, you love your church, and you have given us your words in Proverbs as a warning that we might be taught ways of wisdom in terms of how we might relate to one another.

[ 38 : 07 ] Father, and so we pray that you would help us as a church to prize and to guard unity, that we would be a fellowship marked by love and not conflict.

So help us to heed the warnings, help us to heed the wisdom of your word this evening, and build us, knit us together tight as a church. Give the enemy no foothold amongst us.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.