

## **Holiness and Conflict Resolution**

Scripture Reading: **Romans 14:1-23**

Focus: **Verses 12-21**

**Introduction:** Terry Lynn Barton was a forest-service worker for the state of Colorado. In June of 2002, she was arrested for starting the biggest wildfire in Colorado history. She was charged with willfully and maliciously destroying U.S. property and causing personal injury.

The fire destroyed 138,000 acres of vegetation southwest of Denver, 133 homes, a commercial building and 466 outbuildings. Prosecutors said it caused nearly 30 million dollars in damages.

Barton initially told authorities she had discovered the fire and reported it. She later altered her story, saying she accidentally set it while burning a letter from her estranged husband.

The evidence indicated otherwise, and the jury failed to believe her. She was convicted of deliberately setting the fire, and for her crime, was sentenced to 12 years in a state prison.

In addition Terry Lynn Barton was ordered to pay millions in restitution.

What makes this story so difficult for us to take is that we all know THE JOB OF FIREFIGHTERS IS TO PUT OUT FIRES, NOT START THEM.

It makes no sense to us when someone does what is clearly contrary to their calling.

Sometimes I think this is why people struggle with Christians. On occasion, we do things that are counter to what most people expect believers to do...We don't always act in accordance to our call...

Take the issue of conflict for example.

Rather than be people who put out the fires of conflict, Christians are often the ones that ignite them.

**Background:** This is what we discover in the verses we're studying this morning from **Romans 14**.

It seems that Gentile believers were clashing with Jewish Christians about certain Old Testament laws regarding the eating of meat, the observance of certain religious festivals and the drinking of wine (**Romans 14:2, 5, 21**).

Here was the issue...The converted Jews, who faith is described as "weak," were convinced that they were to continue to follow the laws regarding purity.

Other believers didn't share their opinion and, in fact, saw it quite differently.

As New Covenant Christians (**1 Corinthians 11:25**, "***This cup is the new covenant in my blood.***") they were equally convinced that believers were no longer obligated to the Old Testament ceremonial laws...The result, was a dispute serious enough to require the Apostle Paul's attention.

In this letter, he shares some fundamental truths that are meant to shape our thoughts and guide our behaviors when we find ourselves in conflict with other believers.

I feel the need to make two remarks before I begin with the text:

(1) The principles I'm about to share cannot be applied in the same way to a conflict caused by someone's sin.

First, the offense has to be dealt with in submission to God's Word and then the conflict can be resolved.

The Bible speaks specifically to this issue in **Matthew 18:15** "*If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two*

*of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.” and Galatians 6:1 “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.”* We will address this in more detail next week.

(2) Reconciliation can only occur if the affected parties desire to resolve the conflict.

You cannot be reconciled to someone who doesn't want to be in fellowship with you.

When this happens, we need to acknowledge that the unwillingness to live at peace with a brother or sister in Christ is evidence of walking in the flesh (**Romans 8:6** *“The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.”*), and then follow the instructions from the passages that we referred to in Matthew and Galatians.

Having said this, let's consider what God wants to say to us about conflict resolution through His Word.

### **I. The incentive for conflict resolution (Romans 14:12).**

The primary reason why we're to pursue reconciliation is that we will give an account of ourselves to God.

*“So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”*(**2 Corinthians 5:9-10**)

This has two applications for us.

#### **A. We must not forget that God will judge others.**

Isn't this the language of the preceding verses ( **Romans 14:4, 8-11**)?

Christ's death and resurrection established His lordship over the living and the dead. He is the One who determines not only the circumstances surrounding a believer's life, but also his death.

Paul goes on to say that every knee will bow to Christ and every tongue confess to God that we are the Lord's and He is right to judge.

## **B. We must not forget that God will judge us.**

Each of us will answer as well for our own behavior.

The word "account" takes on a commercial sense in this context. It is the idea of reaching a settlement with someone.

“Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account.” (**Philippians 4:17**)

The failure to resolve a conflict and be reconciled to someone will leave us in the unenviable position of having to face the sovereign and all-knowing judge of human history.

It is very possible that at that time He will expose our self-righteousness and we will lose our eternal rewards

“The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor...If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, <sup>13</sup> their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. <sup>14</sup> If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. <sup>15</sup> If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.” (**1 Corinthians 3:8, 12-15**).

So Paul reminds us to live in relationship with others with a view to eternity.

**Illustration:** In an interview, writer John Grisham recalled how one of his best friends in college died at the age of 25 from a terminal disease.

Prior to his passing, he called up Grisham and asked if they could get together. Over lunch his friend shared the bad news.

With an incredulous look, the writer asked him, "What do you do when you realize you're about to die?" His friend replied, "It's real simple. You get things right with God and you spend as much time with those you love as you can. Then, you settle up with everybody else."

He concluded by saying, "You know, you really you ought to live everyday like you only have a few more days to live."

**Application:** That's good advice; get right with God and others, especially when you know that we will all give an account of ourselves to our Lord for how we get along with the fellow believers.

## **II. The pathway to conflict resolution (Romans 14:13-18).**

If the incentive for conflict resolution is the awareness that we'll be judged by God...the pathway to it, is to follow the law of love.

We are not called to justify our position on an issue, but to act in the most loving way toward those with a different viewpoint.

This means being careful not to put a stumbling block or an obstacle in their way.

*"Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble." (1 John 2:10).*

When it comes to stumbling blocks, only God, who is absolutely righteous and morally perfect, is permitted to insert them.

Our motives are never that pure.

Lets show a little bit of contrast...

*“Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”* **Matthew 16:23**

*“but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,”* **(1 Corinthians 1:23).**

So even though Paul agrees with the Gentile believers that it is okay to eat all kinds of meat, his appeal is to take the path that

- (1) demonstrates clear evidence that you’re walking in the Spirit,
- (2) pleases God
- (3) is approved by others (**Romans 14:18**), in this case the weak in faith.

This is the law of love at work!

**Application:** We never want to do anything, even if it is our right to do it, which might cause someone in the faith to lose sight of Christ.

**Illustration:** At the church I attended prior to coming here there was a gentleman who loved the Lord and loved worshipping. This gentleman was a bit unusual, but he loved Jesus.

From time to time, he would become somewhat boisterous during the worship services causing a leader to have to speak to him.

I remember on one an occasion when we were worshipping and this nice man left his seat, came to the front and began to cry out in rather loud fashion to God.

Now some of you may be thinking, "What’s wrong with that?" Well, it was a little bit distracting to say the least. Our associate pastor at the time, quietly asked the gentleman to return to his seat, but the man wasn’t budging.

In a moment of desperation, I said, "my friend, I know you want to worship, but you're taking people's attention off of Christ, and you're putting it on you."

Without having to say another word, he promptly got up, went back to his seat and participated just like everyone else.

Why? When the law of love became the guiding principle, my friend quickly determined that he didn't want to do anything to cause someone else to take their eyes off of Christ.

May we all have a little bit of this gentleman in us and let love guide our relationships.

### **III. The goal of conflict resolution (Romans 14:19-21).**

We are called to do what leads to peace and mutual edification.

*"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful."* (**Colossians 3:15**).

This has the greatest opportunity to occur when truth and love intersect.

*"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart."* (**1 Peter 1:22**).

The reason we so often fail to resolve conflict in ways that achieve this is because we're more concerned about vindicating our own positions, than we are about reconciling with others.

If we would simply take the approach that the work of God always take priority over the rights of man, conflicts would be eliminated.

In the last few minutes of this message, permit me to share with you four ways that people seek to resolve conflict. You can decide which one makes the most sense in light of this passage.

*A. Some people learn to win by conquering others.*

This creates an "I win, you lose" scenario. Unfortunately, this tactic usually incites more conflict than it resolves as one side is left feeling intimidated and manipulated.

*B. Some people learn to win by capitulating to others.*

In other words, they give in or give up. This creates an "I lose, you win" scenario.

This tactic fails because the people who capitulate are really trying to achieve the same outcome as those who conquer. They just choose a different way of winning. Their hope is to heap so much guilt upon the other party, that they will not possibly be able to enjoy the victory and therefore concede it.

*C. Some people learn to win by compromising with others.*

At first glance you might think this is the best solution. Each person gives up a little and the conflict is resolved.

It is the least appealing to me, however, because it creates an "I lose, you lose" situation as neither party gets what they really want.

*D. Some people learn to win by collaborating with others.*

The word means "to work together." When people collaborate they decide to cooperate on a mutually desired goal.

Isn't this what we're being told to do in verse 19? We are to pursue an outcome that brings peace to the conflicted parties and that helps each to be a better follower of Christ.

This creates a "win/win" situation. It can and does happen when our love for others becomes the impetus for seeking reconciliation.

**Conclusion:** One of the most famous images from the Vietnam War is the photograph of a nine-year-old girl named Phan Thi Kim Phuc. During a battle between North and South Vietnamese troops, American pilots dropped napalm on her tiny village.

Two of her brothers were killed, and she was burned badly. Wearing no clothes, she fled up the road toward the cameraman.

Because of the pain her arms are held out from her side and her mouth is open in a cry of agony. The little girl suffered third-degree burns over 50% of her body, but incredibly, she lived!

She endured 14 months of painful rehabilitation and scores of skin grafts. Each time the pain was so intense she lost consciousness when the doctors touched her.

Since then she has married, emigrated to Canada and become a Christian.

She still has a lot pain and scars stretching up her arms to her chest and back. In 1996, she accepted an invitation from several Vietnam veterans groups composed of men who fought and sacrificed for the cause of democracy, to join in Veterans Day ceremonies in Washington, D.C.

She laid a wreath at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and spoke words of forgiveness. "I have suffered a lot from both physical and emotional pain," she told her audience. "Sometimes I could not breathe. But God saved my life and gave me faith and hope. Even if I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him 'We cannot change history, but we should try to do good things for the present and for the future to promote peace.'"

Brothers and sisters...my friends...The Apostle Paul agrees! "Let us do the things which make for peace and the building up of one another."

In doing so, we become more like Christ...we grow in holiness.