

A Church That Is Filled With Peace

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Philippians 4:1-9

This morning what I would like to do is talk about our relationships with each other in the church. Specifically, I am going to talk about dealing with conflicts that will inevitably arise in any church, but I am going to make this very specific about how we want to deal with our own problems in the Vineyard.

Now, this issue of relationships keeps coming up in the book of Philippians and it does seem that in the midst of an otherwise really wonderful church, that Paul was particularly proud of, and in the midst of one his happiest letters (there really doesn't seem to be a lot of rebuke or correction), nevertheless, in the midst of this happy church and in the midst of this happy letter, the issue of relational conflict and working out differences keeps coming up. For those of you who were here a month or two ago when we went through Philippians 2, we saw Paul urging the Philippians to make his joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose, not doing anything from selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility, counting others better than yourself. Then he goes on to point out the example of Jesus Christ in his self-giving and his humbling of himself and not looking out only for his own interests, but also for the interest of others.

Well, that was sort of general counsel regarding relationships to the church in Philippi and now Paul gets specific because there does seem to have been an issue of conflict in the church that Paul is quite concerned about. We read it in Philippians 4:1-3:

"Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends! I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life."

Now, it is not clear, who Euodia and Syntyche were in the church at Philippi. They were obviously very prominent in the leadership circle in the church because their dispute was of a tremendous concern to Paul. Paul was, perhaps, anxious that their dispute would split the church. It is very possible that they were women who hosted house fellowships in their homes. One of the fellowships could have met at Euodia's home and the other at Syntyche's home. There were many prominent women in leadership in the churches in Macedonia. You see that with Lydia, certainly, in Philippi and in Thessalonica back in Acts 16 and 17.

But whoever the women were in the local church, they had a conflict. And Paul is quite concerned with the conflict.

Now, let me lay out a foundational principle that we need to keep in mind over and over again in this church. The principle that I want us to really get in our guts in Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Columbus is this: A biblical church or a biblical relationship is not one without conflict. In fact, as we are going to see in

a moment, the presence of conflict may indicate that we are dealing with our relationship in a biblical way. A biblical church is not marked by the absence of conflict. A biblical church is marked by the presence of a desperate desire to reconcile. It is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of a reconciling spirit. A spirit in the church that desperately wants peace and wants unity in all cases is the mark of a biblical church.

Now, why do I say that conflict is inevitable? Have you ever noticed how many times the Bible calls us to forgive? To bear with each other? To maintain our unity with each other? The Bible is quite realistic regarding dealing with Christians, even godly Christians, who are fallen and live in a fallen world. We will disagree with each another. And it is not a threat to our unity and it is not a lowering of the bar to simply acknowledge that disagreements are inevitable.

See, it doesn't tell me that a marriage is good when a couple says: "We have never conflicted." In fact, if a couple has never disagreed, I suspect that maybe the reason is because one of the parties is dead or is dominated so that he or she can't express an opinion other than the opinion of the dominant person. Or, if they are not dead or dominated, maybe they are dumb and simply don't have any opinions. But, if you have two healthy human beings living together or relating with one another, they certainly will come at things differently.

Frankly, it usually tells me that a relationship is rather shallow and built on insecure footings when people cannot bring things up and conflict at any level at all. I, generally, won't marry a couple if they haven't worked through at least a few major problems because developing good conflict resolution skills is crucial for a healthy marriage. I am looking for the ability to speak the truth, to work with one another, and then to reconcile after a major conflict. See, we are different from one another.

And when you put a church together as the Lord has here of over 2000 people, we are going to have a whole range of differences in feelings and perspectives, thoughts about what the Bible wants of us, different cultural backgrounds, different gift mixes, different callings. In the midst of all our differences, we must remind ourselves that we are not the standard for the right way to think about things or the right way to be Christians. The amazing thing about each one of us in our fallen condition, is that no matter where we are on the spectrum of personality and viewpoint and gifting, most of us regard our particular perspective and our particular personality to be the standard, to be the right one, most of the time. So, if we are very disorganized and haphazard in our approach to life, we generally will interpret that as being flexible and open to the Spirit and not like those rigid, bookkeeper, cement-head kinds of folks who must plan out everything because we are in the flow of the Spirit.

If we are introverted, we are good listeners, not self-centered talkers. If we are extroverted, we are loving, relational people, not annoying busybodies. Well, we need to recognize that in the midst of our differences, we are not necessarily the standard for humanity or for how to view things.

We will disagree because of our differences. And we conflict because we are similar in our weaknesses. Have you ever noticed how poor your sin looks on someone else? It is the most incredible thing, but as a general rule, the things that rub the most in someone else is not those areas where we differ, but those

areas where we are similar in our weakness or our sins. I believe that we despise those traits, most of all that remind us of ourselves.

I have watched this over and over again in group settings where someone is very self-centered. We will get together in a group and they will talk with someone else who is also self-centered and they will both vie for the attention for about two minutes, sort of raising up like two rams slamming their heads into one another. And then they back off and walk away from one another. And you can feel the chill descend in the room. Both of them can hardly tolerate the other. Why? Because they are similar in their sins. We are very quick to spot in others the things that we are guilty of.

But the ultimate reason why we conflict is because of the kingdom of darkness and because even as Christians we still battle with our sinful, fallen nature.

We have talked about this principle over and over again, but let me repeat it – there are two kingdoms, two rules, at war with one another in this world. The kingdom of God which is the reign and rule of God—God’s desire to bring everything under Jesus Christ—and the kingdom of darkness headed up by Satan. The governing principle of the kingdom of God is reconciliation and peace-making. The rule of God is found as people are brought together in love and in truth.

You know, one of the books that you may wish to study regarding this theme of the kingdom of God and how it brings everything together in unity, in peace, is the book of Ephesians. As you go through the book of Ephesians and study it, you will see this theme of unity and oneness occurring over and over again. The theme verse in the book of Ephesians is found in chapter 1:10. In speaking about the purpose of God, Paul writes, “he is putting into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment: to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”

The purpose of God in Christ is to bring the whole universe together, to reconcile all things to himself and to one another. In Ephesians 2 and 3, Paul shows the outworking of the plans in terms of God’s reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles, bringing these two very different groups together in one body. I am so glad that our church represents that. We have Jews and Gentiles together in one body.

And in Ephesians 4, Paul speaks about the unity of the church and in Ephesians 5 and 6, the reconciliation of relationships in marriage, in the workplace and between parents and children. This is the characteristic of the kingdom of God: reconciled relationships where there has been conflict. But the characteristic of the kingdom of darkness is exactly the opposite. You will always know the kingdom of darkness when people are separating from one another, when friendships are destroyed, when homes are ripped apart, when people get divorced, when churches split, when there is all kinds of unresolved anger, the inability to listen to one another, the unwillingness to be at peace, separation, family break-down, wars, lawsuits—this is all part of the kingdom of darkness.

Of course, in our fallenness, we share that spirit of dissolution and separation and an unwillingness to reconcile in that part of us that the Bible calls the flesh. The flesh is our fallen, sinful, human nature that tends toward destroying relationships.

This past week I did an interesting study of the Galatians 5 “works of the flesh.” In Galatians 5 (and you can cross reference some of these passages that I am going through) beginning in verse 19 Paul describes what he calls the works of the flesh, the activities that do not flow out of the Holy Spirit, but that flow out of our sinful, fallen human natures.

Now, let me ask you a question: When you hear about somebody operating in the flesh, or you hear the term “the works of the flesh” what kinds of sins immediately come to your mind? What is it that you immediately think of when you think of a work of the flesh or someone indulging in the sins of the flesh? Invariably what comes to our minds is sexual sin—adultery and pornography and some kind of impurity. It is interesting that in Paul’s list of the works of the flesh, he refers to three sins regarding sexual brokenness and immorality. Then he goes on and speaks about two sins regarding false religion. So he speaks about immorality i.e. a work of the flesh. He speaks about idolatry and sorcery, which are two sins regarding false religion. Then he goes on and speaks about eight sins that concern our relationship with each other. Things like hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissension, factions and envy.

Brothers and Sisters, do you realize that a church can be filled with the works of the flesh and have not a hint of alcohol use or drug abuse or overt sexual immorality? A church that is filled with gossip, with slander, with people vying with one another for position, a church where people listen regularly to bad reports about others, a church that is characterized by a critical spirit where people are never safe, where folks do not know how to work out their conflicts—that kind of church is dominated by the flesh. The flesh is not just idolatry and immorality. The flesh primarily in Galatians 5 is characterized by all the garbage and trash in our relationships with each other that don’t tend toward reconciliation and love and peace. And the flesh can be rampant and allowed to run amuck in churches.

Getting back to Philippians 4:1-3, the apostle Paul takes note of this particular conflict between Euodia and Syntyche. In verses 4-8 Paul talks about the issues of internal anxiety that can go on in our hearts. In verse 9 he goes on to sum up the first 8 verses this way:

“Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”

Now, what I see in verses 1-8 is Paul’s call for peace in the local church. In verses 1-3, Paul is calling for peace in our relationships. In verses 4-8, Paul is calling for peace in our hearts regarding anxiety and internal upset. And he sums it all up saying: Now listen, I want you guys in the local church to follow my example regarding relationships and regarding what is going on in your heart and the God of peace will be with you in your church.

Next week we will talk about peace in our hearts and peace inside and how we deal with worry and anxiety, but this week we are going to talk about having God’s peace in our relationships in the Vineyard in a talk that I have titled, “A Church that is Filled With Peace.” Let’s pray.

Now, I want to talk about peace in the local church by first of all dealing with a situation where one of you becomes aware of a conflict that you are not involved in. It is not a situation in which you have been the offender, nor the

situation where somebody has offended you. But perhaps in one of your kinship groups you become aware that two people are disputing with one another. Or maybe you become aware of the fact that somebody is upset with one of the leaders in the church. Maybe they are coming to you and telling you something about their upset with another person.

I want you to note the example of Paul. This dispute that he is dealing with in verses 2 and 3 did not involve him. It involved Euodia and Syntyche. And he urges them to work out their differences. And he even calls along side of him some yokefellow. Who this mysterious yokefellow was is a mystery lost to us, but it would have been known to the church and he calls the church to participate in one of the most neglected ministries in the church in the 1990's and that is the ministry of peace-making. I don't know of another ministry that is more rarely talked about in the church today or is more neglected and is more essential than the ministry of peace-making.

The world wages war. But the church is called upon to wage peace under the Prince of Peace and yet very few Christians really take seriously the ministry that has been given to us to wage peace. I want to call you, Christian, to have as a part of your job description – peace wager, soldier for peace.

Let me give you a little illustration regarding who you are in the Vineyard. Every one of you who participates here has been given two buckets: a bucket of water and a bucket of gas. And depending how you use those two buckets, this church is either going to move forward in the purpose that God has for it, or it will be severely hindered in accomplishing the things that the Lord wants. You have been given a bucket of water so that when you see little relational disputes and little fires starting up, you can come along and douse it. But you can just as easily come to those little fires and pour your gasoline on it so that little problems become big problems between people. You can throw water on the fire or you can throw gas on it. Stir it up, spread it around, add your negativity to the conflict, or put it out.

The same thing is true regarding the things that God wants to do in the church. If God is stirring us toward a vision, toward a ministry, toward a particular program—you can come along with your bucket of water and just kill it. Every time there is a little spark of life, you can come along and douse it by being discouraging and cynical. Or when the Lord puts a little spark in your group or in your ministry, when something is going on you can come with encouragement and prayer and cause it to blaze. Every one of you has been given a bucket of water and a bucket of gas. And particularly you leaders—you are carrying big buckets of water and big buckets of gas. And if you don't use them appropriately, this church cannot go forward in the things of God.

Now, some of us choose to hide our buckets and to say, "Oh well, I see a conflict going on, but I don't want to get involved. After all, it is none of my business that these two people are fighting in my group. Or that this person has a major dispute and is going around sharing it. It doesn't involve me."

We could be like Cain and say to God, "Am I my brother's keeper? Do I have to pay attention to problems that are not between me and someone else?"

Of course, we could do worse than non-involvement, we could secretly be happy that two people are fighting. There is a fallen part of us that enjoys watching others have problems that we are not a part of. I remember how much

fun it was for me to watch my two sisters getting disciplined by my dad when I wasn't a part of the problem. You know, there is a secret joy in someone else's pain.

Of course, we could judge others for having problems, we could gossip about them. Or we can just ignore it and do nothing. But the bottom line is that we are our brother's keeper. See, Cain was an eternal representative of everything that is wrong in human relationships. Cain's anger and envy led to murder.

You, brothers and sisters, each one of you is called to wage peace in this church. You are personally responsible for making peace when you see a dispute. It could be as simple as directing the person to go to the person who they have a problem with. You must go. I will hold you accountable. I will get back with you and find out if you have gone and worked that out. I am not saying become part of the problem. I am not saying get all entangled in someone else's issues. But you push for a solution.

You see, the reason why you wage peace and work for peace and add to your Christian job description a line for peacemaker is because you have been captured by a different view of the church than what exists in most of the rest of America. You know, most of America views church as a place you go to on Sunday morning. It is run by those religious people and you go there. But, that is not what we are about here in the Vineyard. We don't go to church. We have been captured by this message in the Bible that we all are the church. We have a high regard for the body of Jesus and we see ourselves as that body.

You note the way that Paul speaks to his brothers and sisters, it is so kind. It is so affirming. "Therefore, my brothers...you whom I love and long for...my joy and my crown...dear friends...help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel...their names are written in the book of life....they are fellow workers..." He couldn't say more about how he sees himself connected to them.

One of the dreadfully discouraging things that has occurred in the last five or ten years is the prominence of criticism directed at other Christians that has become a marketable item. Just go into any Christian bookstore, or flip on Christian radio and what you will find is a very loud stream of critical, angry, judgmental comments, that break relationships, that stirs conflict, that separates people, that bring about mistrust and cynicism and doubts about people's character. Whenever I see this kind of thing going on, I think to myself, "What a low view of the body of Christ that author has or that radio speaker has." In no way do they in their remarks communicate that I say this to someone that I regard as my dear brother, someone who I love and long for. Someone who is my joy and my crown. Someone who is my dear friend. The difficulty I have with this person is nothing compared to the fact that both of our names are written in the book of life.

Why should you wage peace in this church? Because you have finally got it into your mind that you are connected to all these other people sitting around you. That your welfare and their welfare are tied together. That we are all one body, one family. It makes a difference how people in this church are doing. You cannot write people off. You come with your bucket of water and you throw it on the conflict. You go to your sister and make peace. Tell them to forgive that

person for what they have done. Don't harbor bitterness. Oh, I don't want to hear that bad report. Don't talk to me about this other person. I want to throw water on the conflict, not gasoline. Follow the example of Paul. When you see a conflict, make peace.

Now, let's talk about the situation when you are involved in the conflict. Someone has done something which has offended you. What should you do? Someone has done something that irritated you, that offended you, or that upset you—what should you do?

Let me share a few practical words of counsel because you only have one of two choices. One is to not go to them – there are times when you ought not to go to somebody else and there are times when you absolutely have to go.

I put on your outlines a list of those common times when you don't go to somebody else who has offended you. And one of the times when you are not to go is if you are dealing with a person's weakness and not their sin. Flip over to Romans 15:1, I want you to see this.

"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves."

What are we to do with people's weaknesses? Paul says that we are to bear with the failings of the weak. Look at Galatians 6. You have to see this principle. Galatians 6:2, "Carry each other's burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

You know, if peace-making is the most neglected ministry in the church today, I believe that the ministry of bearing people's weaknesses, forbearance and bearing with one another is, perhaps, the second most neglected ministry. Listen, the ministry of Christ was a ministry of bearing. When you think of Jesus, you should think of the word "bearing". Isaiah 53 tells us that surely he has borne our grief and carried our sorrow. It goes on and tells us that he bore the sins of many. Jesus is the sin-bearer. In the hymn "What a Savior," we hear of Jesus' ministry of bearing when there is a verse that goes "bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned he stood. Sealed my pardon with his blood, hallelujah, what a Savior."

If what you are dealing with in terms of your irritation is not a sin, there is no specific action, but it is a weakness, then ask God to help you to bear it. What do I mean by a weakness?

I mean somebody is perfectionistic or fussy or talkative or very shy. We don't confront that. We say, "Oh, God, help me to bear up, to love and see past this weakness." We all carry multiple weaknesses in our temperaments, in our ways of relating. How much we need to ask for grace to help us to bear and to forbear. Don't go to somebody who you are bothered by because of their weakness. Bear it and love past it.

Now, of course, if your relationship with that person is unusually close, there is an unusually high level of trust and confidence, you are very close friends, or you are in a discipling relationship, well, there is not much difficulty in pointing out some weaknesses. But as a general rule, unless the bridge of relationship is unusually thick, I would not drive the 5-ton truck on it in talking about weaknesses.

We also don't go if all the issue is is a matter of your internal thoughts. It doesn't involve a specific sin or offense. How often there are people who

foolishly go to other people to share with them, "I used to have a problem with you because you were fat, but God has really helped me and I want you to know that."

"Oh, I used to think that you were really prideful, but now that I have gotten to know you I know you aren't."

Thank you for ruining my day. I hope you feel better. We don't go to somebody with out private judgments, little things that we think about one another.

And we don't ever go to somebody if we haven't prayed. Never go, even regarding a specific sin against you, if you haven't prayed. Romans 12:14 says, "Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse." Before you ever go to somebody, you need to pray. Why? Because in prayer it is often the case that your attitude toward that other person will change. You start off really upset with another, but then you invite Jesus to be present. And I often picture a scene with me sitting down with someone else that I am upset with and Jesus is in the room. And I have to look Jesus in the eye and say, "Jesus, I want you to tell them to do this. Jesus, this is what they have done wrong. Jesus, this is how I feel in terms of their sin."

And when I picture Jesus sitting in the room with that other person, I also picture Jesus beginning to address me. With how much authenticity could I have the Lord look in my eyes as I am talking with him about these other people's sins, without him beginning to scrutinize my life?

Well, Rich, that is fine. I will be happy to talk with them about this particular sin. What about this in your life? You know, you are very good about spotting that, what about this in your own life?

We pray because often in prayer having to look Jesus in the eye changes us, changes our attitude toward this person. We pray because we are making room for God to work. We believe that God is at work in our lives, that all of us who are followers of Jesus are involved in a process of being changed by the Lord. Well, how about if we began to believe that God could change other people. See, in this church we believe in the Holy Spirit. We don't have to fix everybody and humanly manipulate everyone and every situation and confront people endlessly. In The Vineyard we believe the Holy Spirit is really good at convicting people and changing them.

Friends, we not only never go, if we are talking about a weakness, we don't go if it is a private judgment, we don't go if we haven't prayed, but you never go to somebody if you haven't already forgiven them. You don't go to somebody in order to forgive. You go to try and restore the relationship because you have forgiven already before the Lord.

I have taught this distinction to you before, I will teach it again. Forgiveness in the Bible is a unilateral act. I forgive you. That is something between me and God in which I choose not to judge you, but to leave judgment with the Lord. But for us to have peace with one another, to be reconciled and to have trust restored, sometimes, I must go. I won't have peace with you while you continue to sin. I won't have peace with you if my trust in you has been hurt by something you said or did. I go so that our relationship can be restored. But in terms of my judgment, my anger, my bitterness, I can deal with that alone before God.

Now, on this business of forgiving each other, I had the Lord speak to me the other day and say to me, "Rich, you think about forgiveness only on big issues, but you need to practice forgiveness all the time, every day with every little minor irritation." Let me make it more plain. If somebody said to you, "Have you forgiven everyone that you need to forgive? Is there anything that you are harboring against anyone?" I suspect you would immediately in your mind focus on the major people in your life regarding the major sins. It seems to me that we, Christians, have reserved the word "forgiveness" for level 10, nuclear disasters, major traumas in our life and that the only time we go through the process of forgiveness is when we look back on extraordinary pain and disastrous relationships.

But the ordinary, the typical irritations, the mundane little faults and rubs we do to one another all day long, all the time—boy, that stuff? We rarely pray about that and give it to God. And frankly, I think that all those little irritations that you pickup on the job, between you and your secretary or your boss or coworker or client or customer, or that unkind look or selfish attitude by somebody in one of your groups—all of those little things really clog our spirits, weigh us down, we rarely forgive for that. We need to keep completely clean accounts with everyone. If you were to become more sensitive to those kinds of minor things, I believe you would be much more alive in God. You just wouldn't be carrying around a bunch of junk.

Now, if you have met these requirements, then Matthew 18:15 says, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault just between the two of you." If you have been sinned against and you have prayed and brought it before the Lord and asked for a change of heart. You have prayed for your brother. You have forgiven before God. Then go to your brother and show him his faults between you and him alone. You have been sinned against by someone in the church, you go and tell them. You go directly to them. You do not go to a pastor. You do not go to another leader. You do not go to another friend for counsel. You do not go to your group for prayer and support.

I have made a joke about this so much in the past, but so often we share prayer burdens that are nothing but slander. "Oh, I just have such a burden regarding such and such person. Can we, my faithful prayer partner, pray together regarding this and then maybe you can share it with your prayer network and we can get it out over the Ohio Prayer Satellite Line. We can have a prayer covering that covers the whole thing with prayer. It can bounce off the satellite and it can go to Mars and to the space shuttle."

The Father doesn't want any of that kind of thing. Just go directly. Trust me—99.999% of the time you don't need advice. You don't need counsel regarding what you are to do. Everybody else you talk to is just a rationalization for not doing what the Bible tells you to do which is to go directly to the person who offended you. You are simply trying to, if you are like me, unload the hurt and the upset and the anger by spreading it around to others. And it might relieve you temporarily, but it will not restore the relationship. If you have regard for the body of Christ, you will go to the person who has offended you and you will not talk about them to somebody else.

At the same time, brothers and sisters, we need to stop listening to people's problems with other people. The military has come up with a rule,

“Don’t ask; don’t tell.” Here in Vineyard Columbus, our rule ought to be “Don’t tell; don’t listen.”

You know, leaders and pastors in particular, I believe that many of us have become garbage pails in which people have been free to share with us all kinds of garbage about others. And because we are leaders, we have said, “Oh well, I can listen to this garbage.” I am not talking about a situation involving a past trauma that you may be counseling. I am not talking about a situation involving a child. I am not talking about a situation outside of this church. I am talking about disputes between two adults in this church. There is almost never a need to listen. Somebody starts saying, “You know, I have a problem with so and so...” Stop them! Friend, I don’t need to know.

“Well, this is what they are doing.”

“I do not need to know. Go talk with them.”

“But this pastor said...”

“I don’t need to know. Go talk with them.”

Please resolve your conflict. And then, if it doesn’t work out between you and them, if you want me to go with you, I will go.

You know, we talk about the sin of slander very often and how we speak against each other. The greater sin in the body of Christ today may be our willingness to listen. Why are there so many books published full of slander? Why is there so much talk on the airwaves attacking churches? Because there is an enormous appetite for it in the body of Christ. Because somebody is scratching where the church is itching. Because we love to hear problems between one person and another.

I believe that we enjoy gossip and we enjoy the false intimacy that gossip brings. There is an intimacy, there is, around the faults of another. You and I shared together some secret negative information about another, it brings about a bonding, but it is not the bond of the Holy Spirit. It is a demonic bond. It is a counterfeit bond. If The Vineyard is to have peace, we will not establish those kinds of bonds. Go directly.

Go gently! Oh, you know how hard it is for you to sit there and have someone point out your faults. The Bible continually tells us that when we are going to somebody else in this attempt to restore relationship and win them, to go gently. Galatians 6 says, “Brothers, [and sisters] if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him [or her] gently.”

If you see a speck in someone’s eye and you are the one who is going to take it out, you don’t reach in with filthy hands. You don’t march in wearing army boots. When you are correcting another person because of their sin against you, we are talking about eye surgery.

I got a piece of metal up under my eyelid one time. I was working on a roof. And I mean to tell you that the pain was so great I thought my head was going to come off. I could not stand still. I had to climb down a ladder blind and wander over to a clinic where I just went up to the counter and said, “I have something in my eye. I have to get it out.”

I remember them laying me down on a table and strapping me down. They brought a big magnifying glass in and gently, oh so very gently, this doctor took some kind of cotton swab and she touched my eye with it and pulled that thing out, for which I am eternally grateful.

That is what we are doing when we are correcting somebody in a sin. We are just ever so gently poking them in the eye.

No pretending. Don't pretend that everything is okay. You go, after you fulfilled the steps, you go directly, you go gently, you go in the truth, but you go.

And, finally, there are those situations where we have offended someone else. Let's finish with Matthew 5. Matthew 5 says in verse 23 in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift in front of the altar and first go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gifts."

Now, we have been talking about a situation where perhaps someone has offended you. There are lots of things that you need to think about before you go to them. Whether it is a weakness, and whether you have forgiven and so on. There are loads of situations where if somebody has done something to you, you wouldn't go. The thing is so trivial it is not worth bringing up and on and on.

But if you are the offender, if you wonder if you have done something then the absolute rule of the Bible, without exception, is you go. If we are talking about the local church, you must, by the commandment of Jesus Christ himself, go. And, oh, there are so many reasons why we don't go. This text points out one of them. It says if you are going to worship and you are offering your gifts at the altar and remember there that your brother has something against you. One of the major reasons why we don't go is because we think religion is a good substitute for peace waging and restoring relationship. All of us have a tendency to believe that we can clear up a problem between us and another human being by balancing it or canceling it out through religion and through worship.

Well, I know that I have this bad thing over here, but I have balanced it by something good. I am singing my heart out to God and I am praying and ministering. Jesus said, "Listen, I want the local church to be filled with authentic relationships in which people are actively pursuing peace." Just deal directly with the person. You think someone has something against you, go to them and ask them, "Have I offended you? Did that remark hurt you? Did that thing that I did feel bad to you?"

Don't think you are okay with God because you are sitting here in church. Because you are in worship. I ask this with great affection for you, but do you know that we can have a lot of meaningless, sham worship in The Vineyard, worship that actually, perhaps, would not be acceptable to God?

In the Old Testament, there is a great example of this with King Saul. Saul was told by God to do a certain thing. Instead, he said, "Oh no, I am just going to offer a sacrifice." God came along through the prophet Samuel and said, "Saul, I want you to hear something. To obey me is better than sacrifice."

If you have a problem between you and somebody else, you go deal with it and then come and worship.

The few times that Marlene and I have a fight before church and I stand and try to lift my hands in worship to God. Immediately what floods into my heart is "what a hypocrite you are! How can you lift your hands and pretend to worship while you and your spouse are still at odds? Go deal with it. Pursue peace. And then lift your hands in worship."

Jesus says to us that if you have offended somebody else, don't get religious on me and trade religion for reconciliation. Don't rationalize either and say, "It's no big deal."

Listen, if it is no big deal, then it won't be a problem to ask them if there is something wrong. If it is no big deal, then it will be easy to clear up and they'll appreciate you asking.

You say, "Ah, it is so trivial." Well, then it won't matter.

It is because we feel that it may be a big deal that we don't go. Friends, I believe that the Holy Spirit is often speaking to us about relationships in our lives where there is a strain. And he is saying to us, "Go, go and reach out. Go and find out. Go and make up with this person."

You know, that impetus inside that says, "I am feeling a chill between me and somebody else". Should I go? That is not just your thoughts. So often it is the Holy Spirit who is the God of peace wanting to make peace in this church. I want to plead with you to listen to the voice of the Spirit. If you sense a distance between you and somebody else, go. Go in humility. Go alone. Go prayerfully. Go willing to make amends, but go.

Why? You know why you should go? Well, because Jesus commands us to go and by not going we are communicating something really powerful to that other person. By going we are communicating to that other person that you are important to me. How you feel, an offense you have taken. Your person is important to me. You are important enough that I am going to take the time to find out whether something is wrong and to straighten it out. I take you seriously. I am not going to dismiss you. I am not going to dismiss our relationship. I am not going to say "No big deal." I am going to say to you, "Let's work this out."

By going, we are taking seriously the idea that here in The Vineyard we can help build a great church and the God of peace himself will be with us. So go. Make peace. Let's pray.