



## **Conflict Resolution**

### **Matthew 5:21-25**

Speaker: Dr. Scott Dudley

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Great to see all of you here, and those of you online, thank you for joining us. Worship is more fun when we do it together. So, and thank you, Ben. That was awesome.

Two weeks ago, there was road construction on Bellevue Way, which is right outside our house. And they did the construction from 10 at night until 5 in the morning, multiple nights in a row. And I'm guessing they did that to avoid traffic, but all night, jackhammers, big trucks that shook the entire house. Basically, our entire neighborhood didn't sleep for a week.

And one night, as I was not sleeping, I began to compose the angry email in my head that I was going to send to whatever city official made that decision. And the email started with something like, what dimwit decided that, and then kind of went on from there. And then I thought about this sermon series that we're doing, about how to have better relationships. And then I thought about this particular sermon, which is going to be on how we resolve conflict biblically. And try as I might, I could not think of the verse where Jesus says, thou shalt blast city officials.

So I had to let go of my email, and I thought, man, being a pastor ruins all my fun. We're basing this sermon series on a document that our elders created about how the Bible calls us to relate to each other as a church. But it's also just good principles for how to have great marriages and friendships and relationships with co-workers and neighbors and city officials who make stupid decisions. And one of the principles in this document is we disagree respectfully and we practice biblical conflict resolution.

A few weeks ago, we talked about the disagree respectfully part, and we'll talk about it again in a couple of weeks. So for this one, I'm going to focus on the last half of that sentence. How do we resolve conflict biblically? Because you can't get through life without some kind of relational pain. Friends that hurt us, marriages that are in trouble, parents and children who are fighting, church members at odds with each other. And the

pain of those broken relationships is some of the deepest pain that we will ever feel in life.

Relationships are like Bellevue Way. Every once in a while, they need to be repaired. And good relationship repair is required to have good marriages, good friendships, good workplaces, good churches. And right now, if you can't think of anyone that you are in conflict with, well, first of all, are you sure? Or are you just kind of ignoring it or living with it? But if you really can't think right now of someone that you're in conflict with, don't worry. You will be soon, because that's just how relationships work. So you can store this away for future reference. Or you may know people who are in conflict, and maybe this will help you, help them, work it out.

Jesus says this: if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, first go and be reconciled to them, and then come and offer your gift. And this short passage shows us both why and how we reconcile.

So let's start with a why. Why do we reconcile? Well, first, because Jesus commands it. In fact, he says it's so important that even if you're in church and you're at the altar, and you realize you're unreconciled to someone, leave church, in the middle of church, and go fix it. So let's stand for our final song. Because a lot of us probably should go do that, but I don't want you to, because I spent time writing a sermon, and I'm going to give it, so afterwards, okay? And I find this passage a little bit comforting, because often when I'm preaching, someone gets up and leaves, and now I know it's not the sermon. They're just going to go fix a relationship.

And in Israel, there was only one altar, and it was in the temple in Jerusalem. So what Jesus is saying is, you may have traveled two or three days to get to Jerusalem from where you live, and just as you get to the altar, you go, oh, dang it, I just remembered, Fred's mad at me. Dang it, now I have to go all the way back and fix it. That's how important relationships are to Jesus. That's the priority he gives this.

Now, I know this brings up questions like, well, what if I've tried, the other person doesn't cooperate? I'll get to that in a minute. And also I need to say, the Bible never calls us, never tells us to remain in abusive relationships. If that's the case, you need to get out. But in other relationships, Jesus commands that we reconcile.

Second reason we reconcile is because Jesus commands it. You want to guess the third reason we reconcile? Because Jesus commands it. And that should be it, right? That should be good enough, right? But we are what's in it for me people, so let me give a couple other reasons.

When we reconcile, it frees us from that bitterness and anger that can eat us up inside. We get more joyful friendships, families, schools, workplaces, churches. And we experience Jesus more deeply. Because see, the heart of the gospel is reconciliation.

Jesus died to pay the price for our sins so we can be reconciled to God and to each other. And broken relationships get in the way of us experiencing God's reconciling love toward us. It hurts our relationship with God when we're at odds with other people. That's why he says, leave worship to go reconcile. It's so important because it gets in the way of us being able to experience Jesus. But when we reconcile, we experience him more.

Any two people who can reconcile will have a good marriage. Any group of people in a school or workplace who can reconcile will have a great work environment. And those are some pretty good reasons to practice reconciliation.

So that's the why. How? How do we do this biblically? Well, I'm going to use an acronym. Some of you maybe have heard me use before. I used it a long time ago, like 15 years ago. But I'm going to use it again with some new content. And the acronym is GAPS. To repair gaps in our relationship, follow the GAPS principle.

First, G, go. Instead of stewing on things because someone has hurt you or avoiding people you've got a conflict with, Jesus says, go to that person. Even if you think that person is the one that's to blame, even if you have done a blame assessment study and you have irrefutable scientific proof that that other person is 100% completely and totally to blame, and you are 100% innocent as a newborn baby—well, first, you may have some self-awareness issues you need to work on—but still, go. Go. This broken relationship stuff is important. Jesus says, don't ignore it.

And who do we go to? Well, first, to Jesus in prayer, because we need his help to do this well, but also go to that person you've got the conflict with. So do we go to our workplace and talk about that person? That's a rhetorical question. Shake your head no. Do we go to our Bible studies and, quote, ask for prayer for that person, aka gossip? Do we talk about that person with our church friends? Uh-uh. Go to that person, which means no gossip.

Gossip is listed as a sin in the Bible over 50 times because it's so destructive, and it's almost always either partially or completely false, or it's based on a misunderstanding. One time, I was talking with a friend of mine about the 16th century Protestant reformer Martin Luther, and I said, yeah, Luther was right about a lot of things, but he went about it in a destructive way. He was kind of a jerk. Well, my friend then went and told a bunch of other people that I didn't like Martin Luther King, the civil rights leader. And when I found out, I was like, no, Dr. King, I greatly admire Dr. King. Martin Luther, the reformer. This is how rumors get started. Gossip is almost always partially, if not completely untrue. And it destroys someone's reputation that took a lifetime to build. It gives offices, schools, assisted living centers a negative attitude. In churches, gossip creates fear and division. It's serious stuff.

I know a pastor who on Sundays, if he overhears two people gossiping about someone, he says to them, Oh, I just heard what you said. Here, let's go reconcile with that person right now. Oh, look, he's on the other side of the lobby. Let's go. You can tell him what

you just said about him. Oh, you want me to start doing that? You're like, no, don't do that. Takes care of it though, right?

This also means no anonymous letters, no anonymous notes left on a co-worker's desk or put in another student's locker, no anonymous emails from fake email accounts. That's not repairing relationship. That's a hit-and-run. The other person doesn't have a chance to ask questions, correct false information, and it's just cowardly. Go to the person.

Second, admit your part in the conflict. Because the key step to reconciliation is to realize, wait, I do have a part of this. Now, you may say, well, that other person started it. Jesus says, yeah, that's what they're saying about you. Someone has to make the first move. Go. And admit your part in the conflict. Reconciliation can't happen until both sides repent from how they've hurt each other.

Now, occasionally, there are situations where one person really is not to blame at all and the other person is fully to blame, but that's pretty rare. Usually it takes two. When you're mad at someone, do you ever imagine having the perfect conversation with them in your mind? You know, all the things you'll say to reduce them to intellectual jello that will leave them saying, you're right and I'm completely wrong. Do you ever imagine having that conversation in your mind? Have you ever actually had a conversation that worked that way in real life? Probably not. Because reconciliation is about listening more than it is about talking. Once both sides say, here's how I've hurt you, I'm sorry, reconciliation usually follows.

Now, you may ask, well, what if I admit my part of the conflict, but they don't reciprocate, they don't admit their part of the conflict? Well, then you've done what Jesus tells you to do, and you will discover that obedience has its own rewards. I remember one time saying to someone I was in conflict with, look, I'm not innocent, I've got part of this, here's how I think I hurt you. And he said, good, I'm glad you see that. And then I was like, so is there anything you'd like to say to me? Nope, nope, he never owned his part of the conflict, never apologized for it. But I do remember after that conversation, I felt a lot less angry at him, and I had a sense of peace because I had done the thing Jesus told me to do.

And when we admit our part, we have to be honest about it, okay? Because sometimes people, when you admit your part, when we admit our part, you can't be trivial things, right? You got to get to the real stuff. You can't say something like, I didn't yell at you, I'm just passionate. Oh, far out, right? Or I'm sorry you're so easily offended. You know, the non-apology, apology, the apology that's actually an accusation. No, get to the real stuff. I lied about you. I disrespected you, stuff like that. And when both sides do that, reconciliation gets a lot easier.

And one of the things that helps me do this is to remember all my sins. And they are many. And all the ways I hurt people too. And then all the ways that Jesus has forgiven me for all those sins that I do. And when I remember that, it makes me a lot more humble.

And I realize I am no better than anyone else. And it starts to drain the anger out of me. Go, admit, pee, pray.

Now really, this should be the first thing we do. But then the acronym would be Pagass or P-Gas. And that just seems wrong. So just go with me, pray. Pray before you go to talk to that person. Pray while you're talking to that person. Pray after you've talked to that person.

And four prayers in conflict I have found to be helpful. Jesus, show me where I need to repair a relationship. Because maybe we're just living with it, and Jesus wants to fix it. Jesus, show me my part in the conflict. Jesus, help me to see that other person the way you do. And then Jesus, when I talk to that person, give me the right words and tone of voice. We cannot do this without the Holy Spirit guiding us. So pray constantly.

And then finally, stay. Sometimes reconciliation happens real quickly. Other times, it takes a long time, especially when the wounds go really deep. So we have to stay and keep working at it. Now, there are relationships, there are times when a relationship is so destructive to both people, that the best thing to do is to forgive the other person, and then say, let's just agree to stop hurting each other and go your separate ways. The Bible does not call us to stay in abusive relationships. And sometimes you can't reconcile with someone because they've died. But even then, through prayer, maybe some counseling over time, we can learn to heal from even the deepest hurts. Most relationships can be healed, but it takes time, so we've got to stay.

So let me give you, for instance, I remember one time years ago, pulling out from a stop sign, and I didn't notice that there was a car coming, and he had to slam his brakes on to avoid hitting me. And when he did that, he yelled out the window, hey buddy, what's your problem? Which is a profound question. Like, what is my problem? Really a philosophical issue there, right? And then he gave me an anatomy lesson of sorts, right? And then he sped off.

Now, according to what I've been saying, he did some things right, right? He addressed me privately, he didn't gossip about me with the other drivers, you know? He was impressively direct, and he asked a profound question, but he didn't stay. He didn't want a relationship with me, which is fine, because I didn't want one with him either. But when it's someone we know, you don't have to reconcile with every single person in your life, but when it's someone that we know, we may have to keep at it for a while.

Go, admit, pray, stay. Now, if you've done all of those things, and it still doesn't work, Jesus says this: if someone sins against you, go and point out their fault just between the two of you. No gossip. If they listen to you, you've won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church, which back then would have been more like a small house church, not like this. And if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Now, what he's saying is, if you can't work it out between the two of you, get some help. A friend, a pastor, an elder, a therapist, maybe your small group can help the two of you. And then if that doesn't work, Jesus says treat them like a tax collector, which sounds harsh, but remember how Jesus treated tax collectors. He treated them with respect and with love. The point is, do everything we can to reconcile and maybe get some help. And if that doesn't work, forgive that person, pray for that person, but don't expect a meaningful relationship with them. But that's only after we've tried everything else. We've exhausted all possibilities.

And remember, forgiveness is granted before it is felt, because forgiveness is not a feeling. It is a promise not to tear down the other person and to pray God's best for them. And we can make that promise even when we're angry. It can be very, very hard to do, but if we don't do it, then we turn into hard and bitter people. But when we are repairers of relationship, we become more loving, more kind people, which means any two people can have a happy marriage. Slight exaggeration, but not by much. If you're both doing this, you will have a great marriage. It's also true for friendships and work relationships, and it's true for churches.

If this is how we treat each other, we don't gossip, we don't tear each other down, we assume good intent, because most people have good intentions, then we become a joy-filled community, refreshingly different from the angry world around us.

I know a man who was unfairly fired from his job. It wasn't a competency issue. He just had a disagreement with his boss, and the boss fired him. And his boss was also a good friend, so he lost a friendship in the process, and he was really angry about it. It felt so unjust to him, and he stewed on this for well over a year, even after he got a new job.

Well, then one Sunday in church, he heard a sermon like this one, and the pastor asked, is there anyone you need to reconcile with? And he knew the answer to that question. But the hurt was so deep, the unfairness seemed so big, he just couldn't do it. So he started to pray every morning, pray for his ex-boss slash friend, and pray God's blessing for him, and would pray God bless him, and he'd be specific about the blessings. He'd say, help him thrive in his job, help his marriage to be wonderful, help him to know your love, and then Lord, help me to see him the way you see him.

And he said, I didn't want to do it, I felt nothing but anger, but I did it out of sheer obedience. But over time, as he prayed, God began to call to mind ways that he had not been perfect in that relationship.

Times that he had disagreed with his boss, kind of disrespectfully, kind of taking advantage of the fact that they were friends, to be really blunt with him, but he would do that in meetings in front of other people, which made it really difficult for the boss, eroded his authority.

Well, then one day, he was at the store, and he turned a corner, and there was his ex-boss, right there. And he said it was awkward at first, but they began to talk, and as they

did, he realized that the anger he had inside of him was almost practically gone, and that instead, there was this strange feeling of love for his ex-boss slash friend.

Well, a few weeks after that, he called this man up, and he said, let's meet, and they did. And he said to him, looking back, I realized there were times where I did not honor you as the leader at work. I kind of just took advantage of our friendship, and that puts you in a tough position. I apologize for that.

And it didn't happen all at once, but over the course of several months, they were able to be reconciled. The boss eventually apologized for firing him, and now they're friends again. He went to his boss, he admitted his part, he prayed a lot before, during, after, and he stayed to work it out. Reconciliation is more possible than we think.

So action steps for this week. Two, we're giving as part of this series in every sermon, and then one specific to this sermon.

First, community 101. Say hello to someone that you don't know after church. Ask them a question like, what was the best part of your week? Or something like that.

Community 201. Have the humility to inconvenience someone. Ask them to help you with a project, or ask for a ride to the airport, not because you can't do it on your own, but to create time and space for relationship. And then be willing to do that for someone else. Not everyone else, someone else.

And then Community 301. Is there a relationship Jesus is calling you to repair? You know what to do. Go, admit, pray, and stay. Because Jesus heals relationships in our personal lives, but also as a community in this church.

I recently heard the 2020s described as the Decade of Outrage. 2020s are the Decade of Outrage. Everybody is mad, everybody is listening to be offended and to be outraged. The Decade of Outrage.

But what if, in the middle of this Decade of Outrage, what if we were known as a church where we have all different kinds of people from all different countries, speaking all kinds of different languages with all kinds of different cultures and different political views, and yet disagreed respectfully and graciously? A community where gossip never happened, where conflict was resolved in love.

What if we were known as the fellowship of the forgiven and the forgiving? What if in a divided world where the merchants of rage are constantly inciting us, we showed our world a better way? Forgiveness is the fuel of the kingdom, and reconciliation is the heart of the gospel.

When Leonardo da Vinci was painting his famous Last Supper painting, he used the faces of people he knew, which is why everyone was white, which is historically inaccurate. And he painted Judas, who betrayed Jesus with the face of someone he was

mad at, which seemed like perfect revenge, right? Like for 500 years, people are going to know, right?

But then he couldn't get the expression right on Jesus' face. When he tried to paint Jesus' face, he couldn't get the expression the way he wanted it. So he went and he reconciled with the man that he was mad at, took him out of the painting, and then he was able to paint Jesus' face. In other words, when we reconcile, we see the face of God.

So, Jesus, you are a reconciler. Thank you for dying for us to reconcile us to yourself and to each other, and the Lord teach us to be reconcilers.

In this decade of outrage that we are in, make us people instruments of your peace. And may this church be known as a place where the conflict isn't swept under the carpet, nor does it explode into really destructive ways, but where it's worked out lovingly and graciously.

May we be an oasis from our angry divided world. May we be a place through your power, where relationships are deep and real and authentic, and we show the world a better way that is found only in you. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

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### **Discussion Questions:**

*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Question:** Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- From the text, how would you describe Jesus' view of relationships?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- In the text, or from the sermon (Go, Admit, Pray, Stay), which part of resolving conflict biblically is easiest for you and why? Which part is the most difficult and why?
- Is there a broken relationship in your life that Jesus is calling you to repair? How might you begin that process this week?

**Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.