

Understanding Why People Fight

Last week we looked at inner conflict. In today's message our focus is on Me-You Conflict. Essentially, we are talking about leveraging and resolving external conflict. The reality for many people is that because they do not know how to resolve conflict a lot of time is wasted, and they fail to get things done in their lives. Think of how much time is wasted at home and at work because of unresolved conflict. What is your relationship with conflict? What difficult conversations do you need to have in order to advance action in your life? I believe that conflict is something we can leverage off. It is not something to just manage, but relationships can grow through conflict. Research was carried out on marriages that were struggling. Some ended up surviving whilst others ended in divorce. The ones that ended up surviving had one common denominator; the couples knew how to fight properly. In life we cannot avoid conflict, so we need to know how to engage in it effectively and biblically. If you examine the moments of conflict you have with people around you, you will observe that they tend to fall into one or two categories with each person. Our key focus in this message will be on identifying the various sources of conflict and establishing how to resolve what stems from them. We will look at 10 reasons why people fight and what we can do about it.

Employees in United States companies spend approximately 2.8 hours each week involved in conflict. This amounts to around \$359 billion in hours paid that are filled with – and focused on – conflict instead of on positive productivity. The figure is the equivalent of 385 million days on the job going toward the goal of arguing, as opposed to being put toward collaboration. A full day of productivity each month. This is 2-1/2 weeks of productivity each year (CPP Inc., 2008).

In South Africa hundreds of thousands of disputes are lodged at labour tribunals every year. Think of your everyday home life. How does conflict slow you down? How many times have you been late for work or school because your kids are fighting? How many times have you felt that you wasted a potentially productive week because of the fight you were having with your spouse? One of the marks of a great team is unfiltered conflict around ideas. This is where you can disagree about something, engage in dialogue and after the meeting you are still best friends; no one takes it personally.

What does the bible say about this? What's the Kingdom culture we should be aiming for?

Matthew 5:9

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Eph 4:3-6

³*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.* ⁴*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;* ⁵*one Lord, one faith, one baptism;* ⁶*one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

1 Thessalonians 5:13-18

Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each

other and for everyone else. Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

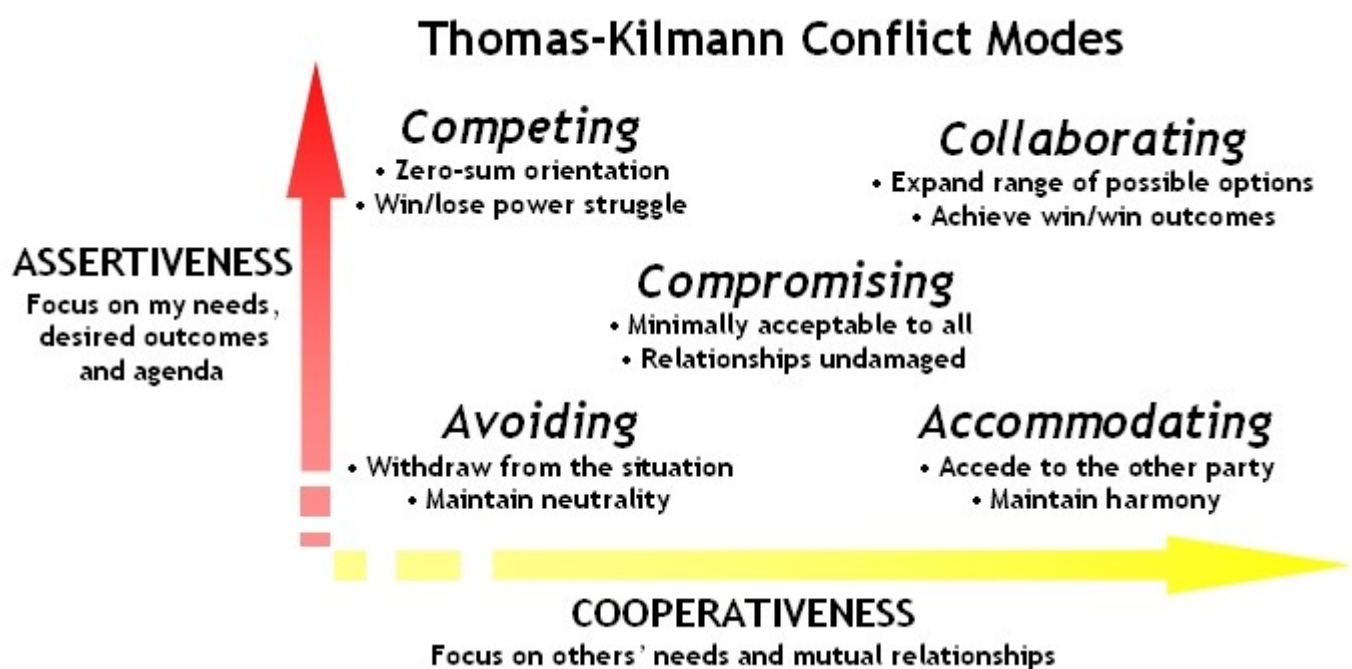
1 Pet 3:8-9

To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kind-hearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.

What would your family, church and workplace look like if everyone did what is stated in the passages above? Imagine that; honour, no revenge, constant rejoicing and prayer, warning of those that are disruptive, blessing people, kind-heartedness and complete patience.

Some people find it a lot easier to deal with conflict than others. I have coached and counselled some people that are strong characters but come from broken homes and I have seen that some of them hate conflict. They associate small conflicts with abandonment. I remember one lady who would call her husband Mr Carpet because he would sweep things under the carpet. He hated conflict despite being a strong character.

Do you know your default conflict handling style? Here are Thomas-Kilmann's Conflict Modes/Styles:



A. Avoiding (uncooperative and unassertive):

Person neglects his or her own concerns as well as those of the other person by not raising or addressing the conflict issue.

B. Accommodating/Obliging (cooperative and unassertive):

One seeks to satisfy the other person's concerns at the expense of one's own.

C. Competing/Dominating (uncooperative and assertive):

The opposite of avoiding; one uses whatever seems appropriate to win one's own position.

D. Collaborating/Integrating (cooperative and assertive):

The opposite of avoiding; one works with the other person to find a solution that fully satisfies both one's own concerns and those of the other.

E. Compromising (intermediate in cooperativeness and assertiveness):

One seeks an expedient middle-ground position that provides partial satisfaction for both parties.

These styles work well in some contexts but not in others, that's why it is important to view this situationally. Each approach has pros and cons. It is important to understand that regardless of our different personalities and default styles, the Bible requires us to deal with conflict. This is part of effective disciple-making.

Matthew 18:15-17

"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

When we identify the source of conflict it becomes a lot easier to resolve it.

Why do people fight and what can we do about it?

A. Power Dynamics

1. Status

Rom 12:3

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

It is interesting how conflict disappears when someone has a servant hearted attitude. They are no longer asking questions like: Why wasn't I asked first? Why was I not given the best seat? Why did they choose him over me? These are all questions to do with status. We see this in marriage a lot: Why did you serve the children before me? Why did you listen to your friend's advice and not mine?

James 2:1-4

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"

There is a place for concern about status and position especially where there has been disregard for it. When you can identify that this is the root cause of the conflict it becomes easier to address it. "Honey, I now realise why I am so upset. When you seek the counsel of your friends on your career matters without asking me about it, I feel isolated and disrespected, especially since your decision will affect me." We see Paul the Apostle having to reassert his status in this passage.

1 Cor 4:14-17

¹⁴*I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children.* ¹⁵*Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.* ¹⁶*Therefore I urge you to imitate me.* ¹⁷*For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.*

When lines of authority are clear then there is order. When there is disagreement with regards to status, there is chaos. Paul here is asserting the need for believers to yield to authority whilst recognising God's overall authority and not abusing our status.

Eph 6:1-9

¹*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.* ²*"Honor your father and mother" (which is the first commandment with a promise),* ³*"that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life on the earth.* ⁴*Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath; instead, bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.* ⁵*Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear and sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.* ⁶*And do this not only to please them while they are watching, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.* ⁷*Serve with good will, as to the Lord and not to men,* ⁸*because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.* ⁹*And masters, do the same for your slaves. Give up your use of threats, because you know that He who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with Him.*

In the Old Testament when there was a leadership vacuum and no king it says that each person did what was right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25). Sadly, some families are like that today. Is it clear who the buck stops with in your family? What is the status of the Bible in your household?

Prov 29:18 (NLT)

When people do not accept divine guidance, they run wild. But whoever obeys the law is joyful.

(ESV) *Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law.*

2. Resource allocation

Acts 6:1

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Philippians 2:4

do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Marriages improve the moment we are delivered from selfishness.

This is why the divorce rate is greatly reduced after 7 years of marriage. People realise it is not about them. We need deliverance from selfishness and envy. When we embrace the abundance mindset we realise that there is enough for everyone. We shift from the zero-based scarcity thinking and embrace the abundance mentality. My gain does not mean your loss.

This also happens in blended family scenarios. There is often the assumption that if he has to go and love his other children he will not love mine. What fights are increasing in your life because of the scarcity mentality? In what areas of your life has conflict increased because of envy within your heart? What would happen if you started to be grateful for all the good things you have access to?

3. Sectarianism

1 Cor 3:3-7

³You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? ⁴For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere human beings? ⁵What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

This is the mindset behind racism, denominationalism and other sources of division. There is a pride that stems from thinking we are superior. Sadly, this is often due to subjective measures. People waste a lot of time arguing about whose football team, or school or church is better. Paul's goal in this narrative is to downplay the servants of God and emphasize God's power. Years ago, I learnt an important principle from one of Jack Hayford's books: You do not have to compare in order to commend. I don't have to say, "you are the best singer in the choir" when I can just say "I am very blessed by your voice". I don't have to say, "you are the most generous person I have met" when I can just say, "I am blessed by your generosity."

B. Interpersonal Dynamics

4. Communication Style

Sometimes you can be moving in the same direction as someone, but you struggle with their tone of voice or their choice of words. This is a type of interpersonal conflict.

Proverbs 12:18

There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, But the tongue of the wise brings healing.

James 1:19-20

This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.

Ephesians 4:29

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

Proverbs 15:1

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Ephesians 4:26

Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,

Romans 12:17-21

¹⁷Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. ¹⁹Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ...

A lot of conflict occurs when someone is attempting to punish another. We have subtle ways of punishing our bosses and our spouses. For example, some people punish others by withdrawing emotionally or stone-walling.

A lot of interpersonal conflict stems from unresolved heart issues.

James 3:16

For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

Beware of fights that you make up in your own head because of your own internal battles and low self-esteem.

If you feel unwanted then everyone around you becomes a persecutor. We reinterpret our external world to line up with our internal mess.

Create rules of engagement for conflict based on the Word of God. For example, "Is it kind, is it necessary, is it true?"

- Avoid using superlatives e.g. "you always"
- Don't raise your voice
- Don't leave it until a future date unless agreed
- Don't bring up unrelated issues
- Don't walk out of the conversation unless a boundary has been violated

Are you aware of your style of relating? Are you very personable or impersonal?

5. Rigidity and inflexibility

Rigidity is the inability to be bent, adapted or changed. Recent research has found this to be one of the main reasons that leaders fail; they were too rigid. The rigid person struggles to adapt to different people. This is central to emotional intelligence. Not everyone is like you and the quicker you embrace and celebrate people's uniqueness, their proclivities and anecdotal behaviour then the quicker you find peace within yourself. Look at how Jesus dealt with Nathaniel. See John 1:45-47 - "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Jesus was not offended by his prejudice, but celebrated his personality by saying "Here is a true Israelite in whom there is no guile/deceit." Your maturity will be seen in your ability to handle other people's immaturity.

Leverage off your differences and celebrate them. Some people are rigid in their outlook so everything is Black-White, Either-Or and polarized. You have savers and spenders, night owls and early birds, high justice people and high mercy people, some are long-winded whilst others just give you the headlines. You might complain about long-winded people but there are some people who would prefer that to having a spouse that literally doesn't talk. When we learn to celebrate what the other person brings to the relationship or team there is a reduction of unnecessary conflict. Sadly, in a lot of marriages the quality that your person used to celebrate is now the thing

they find most irritating. Begin to thank God for that quality and see what happens. It is important to create a non-polarized approach that celebrates and leverages off differences. Diversity is not a negative thing. What do you need to start celebrating in others around you that is different to how you are wired?

1 Corinthians 12:12-14

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

C. Roles

6. Interdependency

This is where you are expecting something from someone because of their role but they fail to deliver. Is the person's role clear? Have you been clear about your expectations? Have you previously given them clear feedback on their performance or delivery? Are they aware of the consequences of non-delivery? Do they know how important this is to you? These questions are crucial. I have seen that with couples there is often an expectation that one's spouse should just know and understand. I have been in situations where someone makes a suggestion very lightly but when I fail to deliver I realise that their desire for the outcome was much more intense than how they had communicated. Do you say, "I wouldn't mind if you join me....." when you really mean "It would really make my day if you join me..." ?

Sometimes when there are lots of fights due to role interdependency it is a sign of lack of planning and communication around those roles. Maybe you have been going with the flow for too long and need deeper clarity. Maybe you need to schedule things a lot more so that no one feels taken advantage of. Role ambiguity is not pleasant. In Paul's ministry he certainly had certain expectations of his fellow team members but sometimes these were not fulfilled.

2 Tim 4:9-16 (NIVUK)

⁹*Do your best to come to me quickly,* ¹⁰*for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia.* ¹¹*Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.* ¹²*I sent Tychicus to Ephesus.* ¹³*When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.* ¹⁴*Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done.* ¹⁵*You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.* ¹⁶*At my first defence, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.*

7. Reciprocal Mutuality

Romans 1:11-12

¹¹*I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—* ¹²*that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.*

Mutuality in relationships is a natural thing that God built into us. Paul the Apostle desired it.

2 Cor 6:11-13 (NIVUK)

¹¹*We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you.*

¹²*We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us.* ¹³*As a fair exchange – I speak as to my children – open wide your hearts also.*

It is important to be able to identify it and articulate it if lack of mutuality is a source of conflict. We often need mutual love and affection, mutual trust, mutual sacrifice and mutual respect. A lot of people struggle with this but fail to communicate it as it can come across needy and selfish. We assume that we should love and not expect the other to do the same because we are being selfless. The reality is that mutuality is necessary for a relationship to be sustained. Jesus first loved us, but He still expects us to respond to His love by remaining in His love. When we don't do so we might experience this:

Matthew 7:21-23

²¹*“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.* ²²*Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’* ²³*Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’*

D. Direction & Approach

8. Methodology

Not everything is on 100%. Often-times parents clash with their kids over methodology. Sadly, it means that they are clashing over the small things and then the relationship is affected when it comes to the big things of life. Learn to pick your battles. When you clash over methodology ask yourself whether it is really vital that things are done your way. Look how Paul, whilst in prison, looked at some differences in approach.

Phil 1:15-18

¹⁵*It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.*

¹⁶*The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel.* ¹⁷*The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.* ¹⁸*But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.*

9. Goals

Anger is often due to blocked goals. We get angry and fight when our goals have been blocked. Sometimes it is because we are not explicit about our goals. If we had been explicit then often there would be alignment. It is important to remind ourselves in conflict that we are on the same team and to keep the main thing the main thing. It is important to ensure that before you get into a church, business partnership or marriage you establish goal and vision alignment. If you are not aligned, this can become the source of a lot of conflict.

Amos 3:3

Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?

10. Philosophy

This can be seen morally, theologically, ecclesiastically, and eschatologically. My position on a number of things has shifted after I have taken time to study that particular area. It is sad how we sometimes divide over things that should not divide us. There are many great men and women of God that I have learned from due to their strong theological framework but we may differ in our expression of worship.

Romans 14:4-6

⁴Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. ⁵One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Ephesians 4:13

until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Our goal is to reach unity of faith in Christ not the unity of pet hobby horse doctrinal preferences.