

Jesus' Instructions for "The Talk"
Forgiveness Series Week 4
April 26, 2015

Intro/welcome

If you're new today, we're heading into the last couple of weeks of our "Finding Forgiveness" series

The idea being that in many of our lives one of the most defining moments is either some mistake we made that we can't quite forgive ourselves for

OR something terrible someone else did to us that we can't quite forgive them for—and in some cases we're not even sure that we WANT to forgive or that we SHOULD forgive

And as we've been talking about this over the past couple of weeks what's happened in our community
is it's kicked over a slew of conversations about specific people and situations where we're struggling with forgiveness

For some of us, it's reminded us that there's stuff we did in the past that we're carrying around with us still

For others of us, it's brought up the person or people who have hurt us in the past

And so to close out our series next week we're going to do something we've never done here before

Next week we're going to do an open question and answer session where you can either text in or write in your questions or situation and I'll do my best to try to help us to close out the gaps where I can

Like I said, we've never done this before and if it's a trainwreck we might not ever do it again!

But come next week and we'll wrap up this series with open-season and your questions that I hope will be helpful to finish out this series

And again I want to encourage you if you're struggling to find forgiveness to check out the books on the book-table that go along with this series

Might be able to help you do some more thinking about your specific situation

Today we're going to tackle the work on the other side of forgiveness, which is reconciliation.

Now remember, a couple of weeks ago we distinguished between forgiveness and a couple of other things that are distinctly separate

Forgiveness doesn't mean reconciliation. Forgiveness is both the cognitive and emotional releasing someone of a debt they owe you or a pain they've inflicted upon you

That's mostly an internal-world work that un-hooks us from that person and what they did to us

We have to do THAT work first before we move to the subsequent step of reconciliation.

So forgiveness and reconciliation are two distinct and separate steps and forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean that reconciliation can happen or even that it SHOULD happen—some situations or people aren't ready for reconciliation or aren't safe to attempt to reconcile with

BUT here's the catch for those of us who are Jesus people:
if we're following Jesus and growing into people who know his heart and his priorities and his desires for this world

Then we know that he's all ABOUT reconciliation. In the Jesus story, forgiveness is the hard-earned means to get to the ends of reconciliation with us, God's children

In God's economy, forgiveness is always followed by and motivated by the ultimate desire for reconciliation.

And his desire for us is to be like him!

Now in order to have true reconciliation, we can't just pretend nothing happened, right?

In order to have true, right, full, honest reconciliation it requires some sort of conversation where we deal with what happened

we talk about it, ideally each party owns up to their part of the situation, we ask for and offer forgiveness and then we can be reconciled

Now some of us LOVE that conversation. Some of us are eager for truth and rightness to come out into the light

And especially if someone else has wronged us, we can't wait to let them have it!

CONFLICT SEEKING!!

On the other hand, some of us are so conflict avoidant, so scared of that conversation, we would rather do ANYTHING WE CAN DO to avoid having to have a hard conversation

I've got a little bit of schizophrenia going on here—always good to know that the guy you're listening to on Sunday's is a little schizophrenic, right?

In my work-life, I am EAGER to have hard conversations. Let's do this!

I'm eager to work through conflict, to talk things out, to dig in and be honest and not pretend or fake it or do dumb little games where we hide the truth from one another

In my work life I'm super-confident that we can have a direct, honest, loving conversation

Where I can own my part of the problem, you can own your part of it, and we can reconcile and move on—and that when we do that, it's better than ever!

On the OTHER hand, in my personal life with friends and family, I am freakishly conflict avoidant.

I have no idea the psychology behind all of it, maybe it just feels like there's more on the line with the people I'm closest to

But I would say that historically over the course of my life, the biggest obstacle to real deep connection with the people I'm closest to is my stubborn refusal to enter into healthy conflict

I was so afraid to initiate conflict or to enter into it that I would do whatever I could to avoid it, talk around it, not deal with it

My son and I had "THE TALK" some time ago, the talk many parents dread for years! that was WAY easier for me than initiating or engaging with a conflict situation in my personal life

One speaker I heard recently summed it up brilliantly as to the problems at BOTH ends of the spectrum—either conflict avoidance or unhealthy conflict seeking

"If you don't talk it out, you're going to act it out."

If you don't talk it out, you're going to act it out. Repeat that with me!

If you're a more aggressive personality, if you don't talk it out you're going to act it out with fits of anger

and maybe finding ways to get BACK at the person who hurt you

If you're more of an avoider-type personality, if you don't talk it out you're going to act it out by dancing all around this thing inside your own head and in relationship with this person.

As a recovering personal-life conflict-avoider, one thing I'm realizing is that in order to avoid conflict while still hitting up against normal frustrations
I end up having all these conversations in my head.

In those conversations, I'm excusing them or making up reasons why it's not a good time to talk about those frustrations.

And those conversations in my head build up an invisible wall between the two of us.

And then I hit that invisible wall because I'm actually still frustrated
and they hit that invisible wall and feels the distance between us but has no idea why.

The work of taking down (and not continually re-building) that invisible wall is critical for us to have real depth of relationship and connection for avoiders

For seekers if we're not careful we can slash and burn and bully our way to get the results we want but leave a trail of bodies in our wake: hurting, smarting, angry, damaged people whom God loves

If we don't talk it out in a healthy way we will act it out in an unhealthy way

Today, we're going to talk about Jesus' instructions for "THE TALK" that most of us don't do well, whether we're conflict seeking or conflict avoidant

Jesus gives us instructions for "the talk" that confronts an issue in love and opens the door for real reconciliation.

We're going to look at those instructions so that we might all grow in how to have "The Talk" of reconciliation
in ways that help us to TALK it out so that we no longer ACT it out

Going to look at the book of Matthew, chapter 18, if you've got a Bible turn there if no Bible on screen/if don't own a Bible got free ones on our book table, grab one

If new to the Bible Matthew is one of the four biographies we have of Jesus
and here Jesus is mid-stride in a series of little teachings about what God is like and how we are to treat one another

15 "If your brother or sister sins against you, [some manuscripts it just says "sins"—this is one of the places where some differences of opinion about which

one is correct] go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.

16 But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' [there, Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament law where in order to convict anyone it couldn't just be one witness but it had to be at least two]

17 If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

My mom has worked in churches pretty much her entire adult life as a choir director

And she's worked in many different churches—I counted up 7, might have been one or two more I'm forgetting

In part because my dad was in the Navy so we'd just be somewhere for 3-4 years before moving on

But of the 7 churches she served in, 3 of them ended horrifically—things got ugly and politicized and nasty.

3 out of 7! That's almost 50% of them that ended in a bloodbath of power struggles and gossip and back-biting

And there have been points when all of us as a family have wondered if this whole church thing was worth it

We all love Jesus, but the way his people treat each other can be just brutal!

Jesus here knows that we don't handle conflict well.

He knows that we're going to sin or sin against each other, and so he outlines a very clear process for working through our issues

And notice that the words used here are "brother or sister" the Greek word refers generally to a 'fellow disciple'

So what Jesus is giving us instructions for is how to handle conflict within the church, within his fellow believers

So one thing we need to establish here at the outset is that Jesus expects that we're going to sin and sin against one another

What makes Jesus-followers different in our relationships with one another is not that we don't sin or hurt one another—of course we're going to sin against each other! Let's not be surprised about that!

What is supposed to make us distinctive is how we deal with it!

This is how we're supposed to deal with conflict within the Christ-following community

Now most of the principles outlined here are going to be applicable in all of our relationships, but it's helpful to see how Jesus is framing this up for us

And so the person you know sins or sins against you and Jesus then says one of the hardest commands in the whole Bible

Commands to not lie or not lust or not be jealous pale in comparison to how difficult this is for some of us:

"go and point out their fault, just between the two of you."

Now, because this command is so incredibly complicated and so incredibly sophisticated and has so many layers and layers of complexity to it

So much nuance and so many moving parts to it

AND because it is so incredibly difficult to do, I figured there must be some sort of translation error—this is so incredibly hard to grasp, there has to be some mistake!

So I dug around and looked up the Greek to see if I could find some sort of loophole or something

And here's what it literally says in the Greek:

"go and point out their fault, just between you and him alone"

Ladies and gentlemen, if you are a Jesus person today, and someone sins against you, here's what Jesus is telling us to do—no loop holes, not much complexity, it's not too confusing, not un-clear is it?

It's just really, really hard to do.

If it's clear that someone else has done something wrong against you

We are called to go and talk to them, just the two of us. Not to everyone else around us, not to pretend it's a prayer request—we're to go to that other person and talk to them about it

This does a number of things, all of them good:

it honors and protects the other person

it stops gossips and rumors from flying around and doing damage to someone else who might actually be innocent

it forces us to pursue reconciliation not just to air our grievances
recreationally and slander other people

As Steve and I were talking about this last week, he noted that there's this great
corrective in here for both those of us who are a conflict seeking and those of us who
are conflict avoidant

For the conflict avoidant, obviously this command from Jesus to go and talk with
someone who sins against you is an important and helpful corrective

We are not to avoid the conversation, we are to step INTO the conversation, to move
towards someone who hurt us just as Christ moves towards us

Someone in my small group this week said that avoiding a conflict is like sweeping a
dead fish under the rug

I've never actually tried to sweep a dead fish under the rug but apparently he has
and he reports that it smells very bad after just a short period of time

I'm telling you, if you're not in a small group, you're missing words of wisdom and
brilliance like that!

But for those of us who avoid conflict, Jesus gives us a very direct and clear
command that if someone sins against us we need to go and talk with them, just
between us

Then Steve pointed out that on the other end of the spectrum those of us who are
conflict seeking, conflict aggressive

This is a VERY measured and deliberate process.

We don't automatically escalate it into drama and gossip and crisis and
bringing everyone into the conflict at the drop of the hat

There's a settled intentionality to this process that Jesus invites us into that keeps
those of us who like drama and like conflict and like to stir things up a bit from
spilling all over everyone else.

BOTH conflict avoidance and conflict seeking is all about me looking out for me! All
about SELF!

If I'm avoidant, I'm trying to self-protect and if I'm seeking I'm trying to self-justify!

But what's Jesus' goal here?

[If they listen to you, you have won them over.]

The goal is to win them over and into RECONCILIATION—Jesus' goal isn't about protecting you OR justifying you

Jesus' goal is to reconcile you to each other!

And so he lays out a process that challenges both the conflict avoidant and the conflict seeking to move past themselves

And into a process that HONORS the other person, even the person who has sinned against us

Jesus is calling us to be so for the other person and so for the relationship that we play through our natural inclinations as either conflict seekers or avoiders that have US at the center

And he's calling us to be willing to put the other person and God's desire for reconciliation to be at the center

that those two things trump our natural inclinations to put ourselves at the center of a conflict.

So here's how I work this out in my two sides of my personality—both the side of me that's fine with conflict and the side that avoids conflict

In a situation in a work or professional environment where I'm frustrated with someone and am just ready to go at it with them

Conflict-seeking check: am I FOR this person and our relationship or am I against them?

Put another way, is this about serving THEM and helping to win them over or is this just all about me, unloading my frustrations, proving MY point and making them feel bad?

If I can get to the point when I am so FOR this person that I have to have this conversation, if I can get to the point where I want reconciliation, not just to let them have it

Then I'm at a good place to have a hard conversation.

And then on the other hand in my personal life where I avoid conflict like the plague, I have to basically repent of my fear that would keep me from relating in healthy ways

Conflict avoidant question: what would faith, hope, and love look like rather than self-protection and fear?

Conflict avoidance is driven by self-protective fear—fear is not the Holy Spirit, the Spirit motivates us into Jesus-style conflict in faith, hope, and love

If we let fear drive the bus of our lives in ANY area of our lives it will always drive us to a dead-end!

Jesus outlines this whole process and the goal is always to win this person over—the goal is to be reconciled, to be restored and back into right relationship

The goal is not to shame them or score points, nor is the goal to have this nice, passive, distant relationship where we don't actually deal with anything

The goal is real community, real forgiveness, real reconciliation

I was talking with someone this week about how all this talk about forgiveness is stirring up all these people who have been wounded and hurt

And I was making the observation that I have very few people coming to me and saying that they're the perpetrators.

For every person who was sinned against, there was someone who sinned against them—right?

And so my question is, where are the people who have done the sinning?

Are they here in our church community or maybe they've opted out of church community in part because of what they've done

And she wisely pointed out that it's more complicated than that. That some people hurt others and they don't even realize they've done it, right?

That there's some situations where people feel wounded or betrayed or hurt by what's been said and they don't even realize they've done any damage

And so here again we see the brilliance of Jesus and why he's giving us these instructions for "THE TALK" that we so often botch

This little conversation just between the two of you is a chance to communicate to someone the reality of what's been done and how it's hurt you

And that might be totally new news to them and it's an opportunity for them to ask forgiveness and to be reconciled with you

VERSUS simply an opportunity for what they did to you to fester in your mind and in your heart where you've got this running tally of what they did to you and how it hurt you

This is all about the chance to be reconciled

Now it doesn't always go down this way, does it? Sometimes we have THE TALK and the person is open and receptive

And sometimes they're not.

Sometimes we have a genuine, loving, honest, gentle conversation and the person responds very defensively and denies any wrong-doing, refuses to even engage with the process

Before we go onto Jesus' next step here we need to pause and ask ourselves a mission-critical question:

How open are you to being on the RECEIVING END of this conversation? Jesus' teaching assumes we're the ones sinned against and having to go and talk to someone else

But for a moment I want to change the script here and ask:

if someone pulled you aside after the service and said, "I need to talk with you about something you did to me."

Are you teachable, humble, soft-hearted enough to have that conversation, hear it, engage with it, and get to the place of reconciliation with someone else?

It is easy to be self-righteous and frustrated at those mythological "other people" who refuse to have hard conversations

While at the same time somehow we ourselves BEING that other person who refuses to have hard conversations

My hope today is that because we're talking about this, right now and this afternoon, there might be some good, crucial conversations

And I've been sort of preparing myself and readying myself—some of you might be upset at me for something that I did, maybe that I'm not even aware of

I want to call us to be a community where we're keeping short accounts on each other and willing to both initiate this conversation AND be on the receiving end of this conversation

Which one of those is harder for you?

Can you even now receive the invitation to both initiate a good, direct process as well as be on the receiving end of someone lovingly coming to you and pointing out something that you've done that's hurt them?

Jesus gives us clear directions as to what our next step is in this process if the person we're talking to doesn't respond:

16 But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'

Okay, so I racked my brain to try to think of a movie that illustrated how this could go bad

but I couldn't think of a movie that illustrated it, but I'm sure there's one out there, so here's the basic plot line of the movie and you can tell me afterwards what picture should have been up here

The basic plot line is that the good guy initially gets beat up by the bad guy(s), then goes and gets his friends and they team up together to beat up the bad guys

And the good guys all live happily ever after and the bad guys go home and cry

You can tell me afterwards what movie would have illustrated this well, let me tell you now that's NOT what Jesus is talking about here

The goal here is not at this point to go and get your friends to pile on and beat-up the bad guy

The goal here is STILL reconciliation, winning over, restoration, healing the relationship

And so if that's the goal, then it's important that we have the right people that we bring along with us in this stage

We need to bring someone along who is mutually known and respected by both parties

It's helpful if these people are good at mediating or helping to decide who's actually in the wrong

someone in my small group this week used the big word 'adjudicate'--make a formal judgment or decision about a problem or disputed matter.

What might happen to you at this point is you might bring people along into a conversation

and they might decide that you're the one in the wrong and the other person is in the right!

A genuine and holy process here that honors the Lord and honors people brings others into it who are the right others who might contribute a fair and thoughtful voice to the conversation

[17 If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.]

Finally, Jesus says to bring it to the church—the elders or whomever might be the authorities in the church community

Remember that in Jesus' day, most of the places he spent time in were small towns with just a couple of synagogues.

And pretty much all of village life revolved around the connection to that synagogue.

So there was a good bit of social as well as spiritual capital in the church that would make excommunication a serious consequence for anyone who was ignoring the church

But the idea is that we bring it to the church body or at least the leaders and see if that can settle it

Jesus closes with this command to treat the un-repentant person as you would a tax collector or a pagan

This has a couple of layers to it

on the one hand, what the person has decided to do if they're not willing to turn from their sin is they're deciding to NOT be a part of the community of God's people

Pagans and tax collectors were outside of God's family, outside of the people who worshipped and prayed together.

If the person refuses to own their sin and what they've done, essentially what they're doing is choosing to opt-out of following God in order to go their own path

To treat them like a pagan and a tax-collector is basically to change our expectations in agreement with what they've chosen

they want to opt-out of following after God by going their own path, okay, we'll then relate to you as someone who has opted out of life with God to do your own thing

And the ways that observant and religious Jews treated pagans and tax collectors was they ostracized them, didn't talk to them much if at all, mostly just avoided them and even despised them

And there's probably one level that Jesus' original hearers sort of assumed that's what he meant and that's probably a decent application

But there's another level here to all of this and that is the question "how did Jesus treat tax collector's and pagans?"

Not like the typical Jew, was it? In fact, look who's writing this story down: Matthew! You know what he was before Jesus called him? A tax collector!

Jesus met him at his tax collector's booth, right there, and called him to follow him

The biographies of Jesus are filled with story after story of Jesus pursuing and showing mercy to tax collectors and sinners

He does two things:

1. He loves them and is compassionate towards them and
2. He's calling them to repent, change their lives, change their ways and come into the family of God

I think that the call for those of us who follow Jesus is to treat un-repentant people like Jesus treated the tax collectors and pagans

They're people outside the family of God who we love and are compassionate towards and who we're inviting to repent and come home

Jesus outlines a process for us that helps us to have "the talk" in ways that encourages conflict-avoiders to take risks

And helps conflict seekers to be more gentle and measured in their approach

All of it with the goal of reconciliation and healthy relationships.

So it's one thing to have a framework for all of this, it's another thing to have some tactics and direction on how to have crucial conversations

Last fall I read the book "Crucial Conversations" which really helped me to think about my own tendencies, I'd really recommend it

it's not an overtly Christian book but it's really good and one of the guys who wrote it is a Christian

Here are a couple of things from that book that've helped me with my own crucial conversations:

1. Start with the heart-goal of reconciliation

It's important for you to understand and have absolute clarity what the goal of this kind of conversation is

The goal is RECONCILIATION if it is possible—that's what God wants, that's what we want

Goal is not to win an argument or win points but to reconcile

2. Establish mutual purpose

I've found this very helpful if at the outset of what could be a hard conversation I not only come in with the mindset of reconciliation versus proving something

But also that I communicate that somehow and we find a way to agree that there's a common goal that we can both be aiming together towards as we have the conversation

For example, I find that in conversations I have with married couples who are struggling and are ready to strangle each other

If we can establish FIRST that what they both want is a healthy, thriving marriage, that moves the target OFF the other person

And ONTO this mutual purpose: healthy, thriving marriage, that's what we both want and that's what we're both willing to sacrifice for

We establish that as the mutual goal first and then we come back to it throughout the conversation

So see if you can't establish mutual purpose

3. Listen first then share your version of the story

Often where break-down happens is there's a common pool of facts, sometimes those get disputed but often it's in how those facts or interactions get interpreted

So when you say "Alex, did you do this thing you said you'd do?" that's a fact

But how I HEAR it, what that MEANS to me COULD go VERY different ways!

First way I could hear it could be as a kind check-in that I'm grateful for—"thank you for following up, I did remember that"

OR I could hear it as you questioning my competence, right? "How dare you question if I did that, do you think I'm ir-responsible?"

The facts are the same, but the story that I'm telling around the facts might be very different.

So it's helpful to listen to each other's version of the facts and the interpretation and I find it helpful to force myself to listen first

This also BUILDS TRUST into the conversation, helps us to open up to a good conversation.

Hard conversations are had on the currency of trust in the bank—if the goal is reconciliation, we need to find ways to put trust chips in the bank

4. Apologize when appropriate

Some of you need to practice this: “I’m sorry.” Try it with me! I find especially conflict seekers need to work on this!

BUT for conflict avoiders, sometimes I find that they use apology to short-circuit and end a conversation that actually needs to be had!

Avoiders, apologies are precious and are not to be used to manipulate your way out of an important conversation.

5. When tensions rise, talk about how you’re talking

So sometimes emotions escalate. When you sense that people are resorting to either silence or violence, pay attention

“Okay, I can tell we’re hitting a place where you’re feeling frustrated or shutting down. Let’s step back.

How are you feeling? What can we do to re-build some trust around our mutual purpose?”

They’ve got a bunch more ideas in their book, but these five have helped me in situations where conflict or tension is happening

This whole forgiveness and reconciliation thing—it’s hard, isn’t it?

Next week, we look forward to tackling your questions and getting to cover a few of the things we’ve left un-covered

But this morning, Jesus gives us something really simple to do—a simple road-map for how to deal with conflict.

Can you imagine how healthy and how ALIVE our community would be if we followed Jesus’ road map? Can we together begin to commit to following Jesus’ road-map for conflict?

And then as we leave this place into a conflict-laden world, can we together commit to being people who are always hoping and praying and moving towards

reconciliation?

That's the heart of the God who so loved us that he sent his son to be reconciled with us.