

Two men lived in a tiny village and got into a huge argument. Since they couldn't settle it themselves, they decided to have their conflict resolved by the wisest man in the village. The first night, one man shared his version. When he finished, the wiseman said: *"You're absolutely right."* The next night, the other man told his side of the story. The wiseman responded: *"You're absolutely right."* After overhearing her husband's answers, she let her husband have it: *"Those men told you two different stories and you told them they were absolutely right. That's impossible - they both can't be absolutely right."* The wiseman turned to his wife, smiled and said: *"You're absolutely right."*

Some people thrive on conflict, but most try to avoid it. Every day we face some kind of conflict. From the child that refuses to do their homework, to the spouse who doesn't share your enthusiasm for the show you're watching, from the neighbor that can't seem to keep their pet in their own yard, to the boss that never seems to be satisfied with your work.

Today's lesson finds us in the middle of a conflict between two Apostles, two brothers in the faith - Paul and Peter. Let's call this a lesson in: **"Conflict Resolution."**

For the most part, the apostles were located in Jerusalem. The Lord's Great Commission had made that their starting point: **"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth."** While Peter did the majority of his mission work with the Jews in Jerusalem, Paul spent most of his time working with Gentiles - non-Jews - on his mission journeys.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he talks about how a Jerusalem Council was one of the high points of the early Christian Church. One of the hot topics that Council discussed was the role of Gentile converts. Would they still have to observe OT Sabbath laws and dietary restrictions like the Jews had been doing for generations? Would they have to be circumcised? Was circumcision necessary for a man to be saved? This meant everything to the Jews. It gave them their identity.

The Jerusalem Council had emphatically stated that a person is NOT saved by following OT rules and regulations. It reaffirmed the Bible truth that a person IS saved by faith alone in what Jesus did on the cross.

In today's lesson, Paul brings up one of the low points of the early Christian Church - his conflict with Peter at the congregation in Antioch. In case you are wondering, today's lesson calls Peter Cephas. Remember how Jesus liked to either change names or give nicknames? He changed Saul's name to Paul. He gave Simon the nickname "rock." Cephas is Latin for rock. Peter is Greek for rock.

Why would these 2 great apostles and leaders of the church clash? Peter came to visit the church Paul was working at in Antioch. Most of its members were Gentiles. When Peter first arrived, he talked with them and ate with them. He hung out with the Gentile Christians and treated them as fellow brothers in the faith.

A little while later, another group came visiting from the church in Jerusalem. When Peter saw this group of Jews, he, all of a sudden, stopped hanging out with the Gentiles. In fact, he did everything possible to avoid them. He got nervous that the visiting Jews might take a negative report back to Jerusalem with them.

What Peter did was more than distance himself from the Gentile Christians. This was a salvation issue. Souls hung in the balance. The truth of the gospel was at stake. Here's why.

The Apostle Paul had written to the churches in Galatia warning them about some false teachers called Judaizers. Judaizers taught that salvation came to those who believed in Jesus, AND who follow and keep the OT Ceremonial Laws. Things like keeping the Sabbath, eating certain foods and circumcision. These Judaizers had followed Paul and had made life miserable at each new congregation he started which were predominantly made up of Gentiles.

What Peter had done was give the impression that the Judaizers were right. That Gentiles couldn't be

“*real*” Christians unless they were circumcised, ate kosher foods and worshipped on the Sabbath.

To make matters worse, Peter was a church leader. His example set off a chain reaction. Other Jews in Antioch, like Barnabas, Paul’s mission partner, also began to distance themselves from Gentiles.

Only a few months earlier at that Jerusalem Council, Peter had been in complete agreement that whether Jew or Gentile, both were saved only by faith in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. And that they should associate with each other, since they were brothers in the faith.

OT believers were saved just like us, by believing in the promise of a Savior, not by keeping the law. What’s the purpose of the law then, if it’s not to tell us how to get to heaven? Paul explains that in his letter to the Romans: **“No one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by keeping the law; rather, through the law we become aware of sin.”** The law is a mirror. It shows us how filthy our sins look to God.

While the mirror of the law shows us how we really look, it can’t do anything to help us improve our appearance. That’s something only the Gospel can do. We are saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus. That’s the gospel truth.

Peter and Paul were both committed to the teachings of God’s Word and salvation by faith in the Savior Jesus. But what Peter claimed in Jerusalem and what he did in front of the members in Antioch made Peter a hypocrite. Paul’s issue here is the gospel: **“I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel.”** This was deadly and dangerous to people’s salvation.

Paul had a decision to make. If he avoids conflict and says nothing, he would look like he agreed with Peter’s actions. If he creates conflict and responds, he risks their friendship.

Can you imagine how Paul felt? Peter was the Apostles’ spokesman. Paul was a former persecutor of the church. If he felt uncomfortable, he didn’t let it stop him. The stakes were too high for Paul to keep quiet. Paul cared enough about the church and Peter to confront him and correct him personally: **I said to**

Cephas in front of them all. He didn’t go behind Peter’s back and gossip.

Many times, a confrontation can turn into a personal attack. But notice how Paul addressed the problem rather than attacking the person. Paul’s purpose was not to hurt Peter by proving him wrong; but to help Peter and bring him back in line with the gospel. God wants us to do the same.

There’s one other thing that Paul doesn’t mention but we’d all agree he did. He prayed. He asked God to give him the wisdom to resolve his conflict with Peter in a way that wouldn’t hurt their friendship, and still allow the truth of the gospel to come out.

That’s a good thing for us to do. Go to God and ask him to give you the wisdom to resolve whatever conflict you’re dealing with. After all he resolved sin, our greatest conflict. He’s prepared to help us resolve any other that might come along.

Although Paul doesn’t tell us the rest of the story, we assume that Peter listened. In his second epistle Peter referred to Paul as a friend. That’s an encouragement for us today. When a Christian friend speaks to us the truth of God’s Word in love, listen.

We’re all sinners living in a world filled with conflict and confrontation. They happen in our families, with our friends, even among Christian brothers and sisters. Follow Paul’s example and go into conflict resolution mode. Don’t pretend nothing is wrong. Go to them and talk the issue out. Resolve the conflict for their own good and the truth of God’s Word.

- *“You’re absolutely right!”* The Father set the plan in motion to resolve the conflict caused by sin.
- *“You’re absolutely right!”* The Son resolved the conflict by coming face-to-face with sin on the cross.
- *“You’re absolutely right!”* The Holy Spirit creates faith in hearts to trust and hold on dearly to these amazing Gospel truths.