

Called to Confront Vested Interests

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[0:00] Here's a question for you. Who has ever been caught up in a conflict? Just put your hands up. You've ever been in a conflict? How about finding yourself in an awkward situation you can get out of? Has anyone ever been in that situation? Yeah, a few of us.

Are any of you quite good at conflict avoidance? Put your hands up if you've never been in conflict or you've rarely been in conflict. Yeah, amazing. Wow, you guys. Yeah, if I was to summarise my sort of approach to conflict in general, it would be shown by this video.

Yes! Oh, dramatic. Just remember I said this is my approach to conflict. That's me. Good on you, Guana.

I think being a Christian, actually, a lot of the time, we think it's meant to be like that. Don't move. Like, they might know we're here. Like, they might notice us. They've noticed us.

We're running away, just trying to avoid any sort of offence or conflict. I don't know if you've ever felt like that, just trying to get through the day without being pounced on by someone who's out to get you.

[1:16] It can be very exhausting. In today's passage, we see a very British Paul trying to avoid conflict, trying to drown out the sea is mocking. But he eventually cracks and he confronts a girl and the consequences of that choice are pretty bad.

He gets beat up numerous times. He ends up in prison and he gets kicked out of the city. Was it really worth it? Was confronting that girl really worth all that?

Although I joke a bit about my conflict avoidance, and I do think that that's very true for a lot of us, there have been times in my life where I've actually decided not to avoid conflict.

And often it's where something inside you stirs you so much that you just cannot keep quiet. I remember once when I was a school kid and one of my friends was walking ahead of me.

We don't need to see that again. I was walking ahead of me and this guy just came up to him in the park and I could just see him pointing at his fingers, looking really quite aggressive, pointing at his phone.

[2:21] And I was like 30 metres away or whatever and I did what any of us would do. I turned the other way and I ran away as quick as I could. No, for some bizarre reason, I ran straight into the midst of this conflict.

I was like, what are you doing? This guy's bigger than me, so you can kind of see how mad I was. I was like, what are you doing? And he starts mouthing off and starts pointing at my phone in my pockets.

And I just go, jog on, mate. And he did. Conflict. Solution. Simple. Very rarely is that true of conflict, right?

Normally, I would have got mugged or punched. I had to call Clive in his previous life as a policeman to get an incident report. You know, but this time, somehow it was really easy.

I got out of it. Unfortunately for Paul, it's not the case. And so when I read this passage, I kept reading it, reading it, saying to myself, why did this go so wrong for Paul?

[3:25] Was it the fact that they took away the guy's business? So this woman, this seer, was a slave and she was income. And when she got healed and freed of the spirit, she was useless to that guy.

The income's gone. I thought, maybe. Maybe that's why it's a big deal. And then I thought, is it because they're not local? They're walking around and they're not local. Maybe it's one of those places you don't go down the alleys.

And I thought, it's possible. But Jews are all over the empire. And then I realised, this was not just any conflict. This was a conflict between an empire and a kingdom.

Let's have a look. This is a conflict between two worlds, essentially. Let's have a look at what she says. If you could put up that first verse for me, please. These servants are from the Most High God.

I think it needs some, whatever you call these. who are telling you the way to be saved. So when we read this, we often go past it. But this isn't a declaration.

[4 : 33] This spirit is not on their side. This is a warning. This is even mocking. Remember, it goes on for ages and ages, following them around, saying it again and again.

This is a warning and a mocking. And let's think about the context. Paul and Silas are walking around a town called Thyatira. Or Thyatira, or whatever.

Basically, it's in Rome. A Roman province. And it's not far from a place called Pergamum. So if you like reading Revelation, you might recognise that name. It's one of the churches that John writes to. And do you know what he says about that church? He says, that is the place where Satan lives.

This place that they're walking around is the place where Satan lives. It's a Hellenistic haven where all sorts of gods get worshipped.

This girl is sending alarm bells. She's saying, watch out. These servants are from the Most High God and they're telling you the way to be saved. How do you know that, Jay?

[5 : 39] How do you know that that's what's going on? Well, let's look at the next verse that I want us to pull out. Which is, when they get beat up, they get dragged in front of a bunch of other people.

And in front of the magistrates. These men are Jews and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept.

Last week you had geography. This week you get history, okay? Has anyone heard of Emperor Tiberius? Yeah? So he's an interesting character in Rome. He asked the Senate to legalise Christianity.

He asked the Senate to declare Christ a Roman God. But the Senate actually refused and outlawed it. Made it illegal. So Rome is happy with you worshipping any god as long as it's an authorised god. And they don't mind you having your own god as long as you honour theirs. So that's the context of which Rome worked when it came to religion. These guys are unauthorised. These guys are telling people to worship a god that is not allowed in Rome.

[6 : 48] In the place where Hellenism is massive. The conflict is not even what they've said yet in fact. It's the fact that they represent Jesus.

Sometimes we can avoid conflict, right? And that's really good. We're called to be peacemakers, right?

That's the art of making peace. Not peacekeepers, but peacemakers. We should represent peace. Because our prince is the prince of peace. But sometimes we cannot keep quiet.

And Paul couldn't keep quiet. The eternal ramifications of what he was representing were so great that he had to stop what was going on.

We are called to conflict because we walk around doing life. We are representing Jesus and gospel.

[7 : 55] And we're doing that to a world that doesn't want to hear it. I wonder if you ever think of yourself like that as a conflict maker. Just by walking around.

Do you ever feel like that? I'm a walking time bomb. Someone's going to find out I'm a Christian.

And they're going to ask those questions that I have an answer to they don't want to hear.

See, in John 15, Jesus tells his followers a really harsh passage. I told you some of this was going to get heavy and harsh. He says to them, If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.

If you belong to the world, the world will love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

Nobody wants to hear that, right? By choosing life, light, love, the world's going to hate you. But this is so important for us to remember.

[9 : 04] Whether we choose it or not, we the church are walking testimonies that Jesus is the only true Lord. Think about that.

As much as you want to fit in and not be offensive, what we stand for, our views, our message, the true life that can only be found in Christ, it's offensive.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, for the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. It's a paradox. It's weird.

But our message of love, grace and mercy, eternal life, forgiveness of sins, whether we are speaking it out or just living it out, this wonderful message is offensive to a world that wants to make God's out of everything else.

When we say Jesus is Lord, we are saying without any other words needed that everybody else's beliefs, things that they have built their life on, are wrong.

[10:10] Heavy. So what can we learn from this passage about how we should respond to the kingdom conflict then?

Whether it be a conflict of our morals, of our life choices, of how we use our money, our time, in the workplace, at home, how can we like Paul honour the message we carry? And I have three words for us.

Costly, worship, and creates. And the first one is this, there is going to always be a cost to the kingdom of God. There is always going to be a cost.

If you think this message can be shared and not offend, you've missed the point. The cost is with Paul, as with Jesus on the cross, is part of the message of the gospel. The God who loved us did not stay quiet, but carried a cross for us.

And so we too carry one. There's a cost. The second point is this, strength though, comes through worship.

[11:16] We missed out in our reading, but in the middle of the passage, we have Paul and Silas in prison. I think that they'd be justified to be a bit moany, a bit grumpy about that.

They're praising, they're singing songs to God. In the midst of their suffering, they're glorifying him. But let's think about us.

When things get hard, often the first thing we drop is worship. Life is frustrating right now. I just can't be dealing with prayer.

I'm not in a good place. I can't be singing that song. I'm not in a good place. I can't be reading my Bible. I don't want to celebrate how good God is right now. See, Satan loves that.

When things get hard, we take our eyes off of Jesus. And what happens? We've lost the very thing that can keep us going. See, our life, we were made for worship.

[12:22] Whether that is prayer, singing, or just being present with God. You know, I'm going to side talk. Mother Teresa is this really interesting character.

She was, I'm sure you've all heard of her. She was in an interview. And someone asked her, well, what happens when you pray? She says, I listen.

And then she said, well, what does God do? He listens. Isn't that amazing? That picture, that actually, our base response, it doesn't, it's not words, it's perspective.

It's about being with God. And I thought, actually, she's a good advocate for conflict because she gave her life to the kingdom of God. And yet, her base place was, was the presence of God.

And now, when we're suffering in a conflict, we're struggling, we're feeling low, the first thing we drop is prayer. The first thing we drop is worship. We may not go to church this week.

[13:25] I don't think church is the only place we should be, by the way. But, it's one of those places where we start asking questions of ourselves. Why are we not, why don't we want to go be with the body anymore? Why don't we want to worship God today?

Our strength in conflict comes through worship. We need to keep praising. Think of the Psalms, think of David. Those are, those are praise and those are struggles and those are frustrations, but they always end.

But you are God. Why do you think the Psalms are so important for the church, even today? It's a very Anglican thing I'm about to say in my learning how to be Anglican. It's actually, the Psalms are something we should be reading every day and I don't think it's so that we read the Bible and get better at memorising it.

I think we remember that life is hard and it has been hard and that following Jesus, or let's caveat that, following God, even when you're a king, is hard.

Even when you have all the power, you have all the wealth, all the money, it's still hard. I think it's really important that we remember that.

[14:38] Praise is our weapon. It's our weapon. And actually, if you don't believe me, look at the persecuted church.

If you've ever looked at a map of where the growth of the church is at is most fruited. I was going to think of a better word. I can't think of one. Where the fruition is. Fruitfulness.

Words. Is the persecuted church. The biggest church now is not in the West. It's growing out of Africa. Where they got nothing. I'm not going to be naive and say that Africa is this desolate place. It's a beautiful place and there's amazing, amazing structure and amazing people. But what's interesting is they don't generally have what we have. And yet the church is bursting out of that. Think of China. Think of the church, how big it is now. It grew on the backs of people that hid and it was a life sentence if they got caught. They were dead if they got caught for this faith.

[15 : 35] Look at Syria and Iraq. Places where literally evil has come in to take them from their homes. And the church, you know what?

ISIS people come into faith. I heard a story. A friend of mine is really unwise. And he, which is what makes him awesome. But he decided he was going to go to Afghanistan and just hang out with this guy who was out there.

And he got to meet lots of different people. Awkwardly bumped into a few scary people and had to pretend because he had a beard. A better one than mine.

He had to, he sort of mumbled a bit of Arabic so that they might think that he was like not Western, basically. And he met this guy who is known as the Paul to ISIS.

And he told me the story of this guy who, there's no children here so I'm going to go for it. He basically broke into a house church. He was an ISIS warrior and he lined them all up and he killed them.

[16 : 44] And he got to the last one and this last one held a Bible to him and just said take this Bible, take this Bible, just take this Bible. And the guy killed him and he took the Bible and Jesus met him and completely ruined his life.

Can you imagine being an ISIS member that Jesus met? Completely ruined his life. And he now goes, like Paul did, we forget that this Paul, he wasn't a good guy at the start.

Start of the story, not a good guy. And he goes around proclaiming the gospel in the most difficult places and it is growing. And that brings me on to my final point which is there.

So, it's costly. Our weapon is worship. But not only is our weapon worship, it creates opportunity. Have you ever really come out of an argument or a debate or whatever you'd like to call it with someone about your faith and they've been, they've changed because of it or they've wanted to know more, they've asked to meet up again to talk about it.

You've had a conflict of interest, you've had a conflict of beliefs, but there's something in that that births an opportunity. Think of Paul and Silas, their statement looks like it was a really bad idea, but what comes out of that moment, just in that passage, we get some amazing results.

[18 : 11] In the midst of that, a whole household becomes Christian. In the midst of that, they declare the word of God. And not only do they transform this guard's life and his family's life and probably when you say household, that's not a small number, especially not for somebody who's in charge of a jail.

They also got the boldness. They had the opportunity to challenge the very system that meant that they were in prison. And they won. They were kicked out, fine.

But they were kicked out because they couldn't argue with them. They were kicked out because they couldn't beat this. They couldn't beat, they were Roman citizens, they couldn't beat it, they come all apologetically. So although it looks bad, actually goods come from it.

They've been able to honour God, they've been able to proclaim the gospel in the place that is Satan's home and they've been able to silence the empire represented by the magistrates.

We're coming into land now. I want to encourage you to be brave. If any of those three things ring true for you, I want you to get prayer today.

[19 : 28] You're in a conflict right now and it's costing you. Or actually, you're really struggling to worship. You're really struggling where your life is right now, the stress, the strains of it.

You're struggling to put Jesus back at the centre. You're struggling to go to the source of life. We need to break that. We need to pray for you. Maybe you're thinking, I really want this opportunity to happen.

Well, let's pray for you. Let us come as a family together and pray for you. I know it's a big step, but when, I don't know, when ministry team are around, I think they're going to be at the back, are they? Yeah. Or even if that's too big a step, here with a church and with family, there are people sat next to you. Sorry if you hate being asked to pray for people.

But if you really need prayer and you think, actually, that's too far for me, ask the person next to you, just over coffee time, just ask them, can you pray for me because I'm in this situation?

[20 : 40] You don't have to give them details, but it's costing me. Or I'm struggling to worship right now. I'm struggling to get perspective. I'm struggling to put God first.

All these other bits that are causing me frustrations and anger, they're in front of him. Get some prayer. And then the final one, if you need that opportunity to happen, let's pray for it.

Let's bring God into the center. And I want you to remember this. This is my last line. We've been talking about conflict, but remember that the God of all comfort, who knows struggle and pain, who knows the cost of our message better than anyone, is right by your side.

Right by your side. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.