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UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

Interview with Rev Bruce Zagel

Interviewer: I'm Richard Fox and this is Messages of Hope. How do you deal with conflict?

Voxpop:

"When a conflict arises I have to run away otherwise I will lash out."

"If I feel like I'm being attacked personally, my gut reaction is to attack them back. Like twice as hard or try to one up them in some way."

"For me I always think like – what should I have done, like, I thought I did my best."

Interviewer: Whenever 2 or more people are involved, there's likely to be conflict at some point – no matter how much we might love the other person. We just can't seem to avoid it. Today I'll be talking with Bruce Zagel about understanding conflict and dealing with it positively. Bruce has over 30 years of experience as a mediator in several countries around the world. Stay tuned for some hope in dealing with conflict in a healthy way.

Interviewer: Bruce, you've had a lot of experience in dealing with conflict. As a counsellor in the juvenile court system, 20 years as a pastor, and teaching peacemaking skills across nine countries. How do you define conflict?

Bruce: Conflict can be as simple as a disagreement over what's for tea today, because it's a difference of opinion, or a purpose that frustrates somebody else's goals or desires.

Interviewer: So if I want steak and somebody else wants spaghetti?

Bruce: That's a conflict. It's not a big conflict hopefully, but the question is what do you do with it? That's going to determine how severe the conflict is.

Interviewer: So why do many of us find dealing with conflict so difficult?

Bruce: I've asked the question over many, many years when I'm teaching, "How many of you enjoy conflict?" Rarely do I get people raising their hands saying, "yeah, I really enjoy conflict". It's kind of like, how many of you really enjoy going to the dentist? Not many people really enjoy it. So most people don't enjoy conflict, and because of that, most people try to avoid dealing with conflict. There's a couple of ways of describing that, and we describe our responses to conflict as the 'fight or flight' responses.

Interviewer: Yeah, either you want to tackle it head on or run away as fast as you can and ignore it.

Bruce: Exactly. Some people's natural response is to avoid the conflict and not deal with it. They want to sweep it under the carpet or just pretend that it doesn't exist. In their own minds it doesn't exist but in their actions and in their heart it does exist. And then, the other

way is the 'fight' response, where people try to overcome the conflict, and even to win in the situation.

Interviewer: Where do those two natural types of responses head?

Bruce: On the attack side, or on the fight side it can start out with talking about somebody badly behind their back. That's a form of assault with the tongue. you are assaulting their character,. Another way it can surface is we'll take somebody to court. And that's not helpful either because Even if you've won the lawsuit, you've lost because of time, because of relationships, because of the cost of it. The last step on that attack side, then, is murder. That's the ultimate consequence of conflict in attack, and fight, is people can actually take someone's life. But there's another way that's more common than going to that murder step, and that's to destroy someone's reputation. We can murder the person's reputation by the way we talk about people. The way we write about people, Or, the way the Bible talks about it - that we can actually murder someone in our heart; that if we think badly about them, if we have hatred towards them, anger towards them, we can actually kill them in our heart.

Interviewer: What about when we avoid the conflict?

Bruce: On the other side, the 'flight' side - the running away side, we can start with denial, where we're saying 'well I don't really have conflict. I love everybody. Or, I might have something against somebody in my heart but I just don't want to deal with them. I avoid them. That's called denial. And if that doesn't work. If the tension gets so high that I can't really deal with it, then I'll flee. I'll run away from it. Maybe somebody leaves a job because of the tension and the conflict that they've got. Or marriage. What happens when the tension in marriage gets so high that they can't deal with it? 'Flight' leads in divorce. They flee the relationship because of the tension that's there and the conflict that's there in the relationship.

Interviewer: But that's not a healthy place to be obviously?

Bruce: Neither the 'fight' side nor the 'flight' side, neither side is a healthy place to be.

Interviewer: What do we need to deal with conflict in a better way?

Bruce: There's lots of different ways people have written about how to deal with conflict and the self-help kinds of stuff and all of that, but as a Christian, as one who looks at what the bible says about life - the bible really talks a lot about how to deal with our conflicts on a daily basis.

Interviewer: Not just a story book.

Bruce: Not just stories. Great stories

They have a meaning, and there's a lot the bible says about how to deal with our personal relationships. One of the ways that it talks about it is in 1 Corinthians 10, verse 31, where Paul writes: Whatever you do, whether you eat or drink, do it all to the glory of God.

So as a Christian I get to think about how can I glorify God in this situation. Whether it's a normal everyday kind of situation or whether it's a conflict situation.

Interviewer: So is that like putting ourselves a little bit out of the context of the conflict that's happening and submitting to something greater that's going on?

Bruce: Ah, I'll tell you a little secret here. I don't like to admit that I'm wrong. I haven't met anybody that really likes to admit they're wrong. So when I've got a conflict with my wife at home, or with somebody I work with, I need to first of all remember what God has done for me. He sent his son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for my sins. He's forgiven me for Jesus' sake. Therefore, because of that, I get to look at life differently. And because of that I can deal with this conflict in a different way.

Interviewer: So is this access to God just for Christians?

Bruce: It's for everybody because God has forgiven everybody's sins in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so, because I'm forgiven, I get to deal with that person, whether it's my wife, or somebody I work with, or somebody else in my family or my acquaintance. I get to deal with them in a different way because I'm forgiven. I'm a new person in Christ.

Interviewer: It's like a new opportunity.

Bruce: I'm really glad you used that word, 'opportunity' because instead of fighting and trying to overcome conflict - instead of trying to run away from it, conflict actually provides us opportunities. Opportunities to deal with that conflict in a way that God gives us.

Interviewer: This is messages of hope and today we're talking about conflict. How do you feel conflict?

Voxpop:

"I think the frightening thing about conflict is that it makes you very vulnerable. Because everything you are is laid bare on the table and you have to be able to justify that."

"I don't like being wrong but sometimes you discover through conflict that you are wrong."

"It gives the people involved an opportunity to grow. To be able to sort the conflict out and to move on from that and become better and stronger people. The more vulnerable that you are and the more trust that you build, the better relationship you have at the end of the day."

"If you go in there with the mindset of trying to understand them and putting the relationship first and seeing where you can go from here after hearing each others needs, that's a really positive thing."

Interviewer: Conflict is rarely easy but there are ways of dealing with it in positive ways that can build a relationship rather than destroy it. Conflict can actually be an opportunity for deeper relationships.

Bruce: Now I suspect that you probably haven't thought a lot about your conflicts as an opportunity to serve the other person that you're in conflict with.

Interviewer: No, you often think it's something to avoid, that it's the worse thing you can go through. But it doesn't sound like an easy process though?

Bruce: It's hard work. When I've had difficult conflicts its been almost like pulling teeth to get me to look at myself and see what I've contributed to the conflict, and to help the other person look at themselves and see how they've contributed to the conflict. But the goal is to restore that relationship as we share the forgiveness that we have in Christ.

The big benefit that dealing with our conflict this way has, is it restores relationships, strengthens relationships. Whether that's in the family, or in the church, or at work. Wherever we have relationships, it strengthens relationships. And I don't know anybody out there that doesn't want to have good strong relationships. Because living in this life is about relationships.

But this is not just trying to apply a program. It's not about saying just follow step one, step two, step three and everything's going to be fine. No, it's about living a lifestyle. About living a life of reconciliation. About thinking regularly about what does it mean that I'm forgiven by God, and how can I apply that forgiveness to my relationships. It means, when I've got a conflict with somebody, how can I build that relationship up, how can I restore it, because of what God's done for me. It's living a life daily in thanksgiving for what I've received from God. And one way that people can really apply that very quickly is try asking a question. How can I serve you best? It's not so much helping others, coz that can imply standing over the top of somebody, or standing alongside someone. But serving someone implies putting yourself beneath them, and that's what Jesus did. And I get to imitate him, so Richard, how can I serve you best today?

Interviewer: Well thank you Bruce for sharing what conflict is and how to deal with it.

Bruce: You're very welcome.

Interviewer: If you want to find better ways of dealing with conflict contact us for the free booklet called FORGIVENESS. It'll help you understand forgiveness and it's power to heal relationships. For a free booklet about FORGIVENESS call 1800 353 350, that's 1800 353 350 or go to messagesofhope.org.au to order your free copy. That's messagesofhope.org.au.

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