**SLIDE 1 Head in the Sand**

Series: Conflict – Week 2

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Bumper:

Welcome

We are currently in a series called “Conflict”. Last week Dr. Spaur shared a message that looked at how conflict can be viewed as a win or lose situation rather than an opportunity for reconciliation. Today we’re going to look at the opposite of aggressively fighting to win and that’s our tendency to stick our head in the sand and pretend there’s no conflict at all.

In fact, we can be so good at that, we have created language that describes how we ignore conflicts and problems, I already mentioned burying our heads in the sand. We also say things like:

Turn a blind eye, blow it off, look the other way, sweep it aside, let it go, and gloss over.

Any of those sound familiar?

How many of you remember using an “ignoring” technique as a kid? For instance, you remember being in bed at night and you knew without a doubt, there was a “something” under your bed? When that feeling hit, you did what all intelligent, monster-savvy kids do - you cover your head with the blanket. You tell yourself, “If I’m quiet and I don’t move and I don’t acknowledge IT, IT will go away”. You were instituting a well-known rule – if I can’t see IT, then IT can’t see me. This is a universal law of physics every 5 year old understands. But, what inevitably happened?

You guessed it - Eventually, you *had* to go to the bathroom. You created a secondary issue. Those 3 cups of water you drank trying to make the bedtime stretch out to avoid the things under the bed are now coming back to haunt you. And you’d lay there with your head under the covers just willing your body into submission. And the more you tried to ignore your bladder, the worse it got. Your bladder is like “*You know ignoring me isn’t going to end well, right*?” You could try to ignore it, put that trip to the bathroom off, pretend like you weren’t about to explode. But sooner or later you *have* to deal with it. But you didn’t want to acknowledge the need for the bathroom, because when you did, you were going to have to get up and then when you got up out of bed the thing under the bed that had been growing impatient and waiting for you was going to grab your foot as you made a run for the bathroom. All your aversion techniques are imploding.

Relational conflict works in a very similar fashion. You can duck your head under the covers but it’s not going to just go away.

**SLIDE 2** When we ignore conflict it doesn’t get better; it gets *infected*. I believe that’s why Jesus was so pointed in confronting conflict – he didn’t let things fester. He dealt with conflict head on. As followers of Jesus, we want to look and act more like Jesus. So let’s take a peek and see what the Bible has to say about conflict resolution.

**SLIDE 3** Romans 12:18 (NIV) “*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”*

At first read, you might say, well I like the “as far it depends on me” part. As in “if it depends on me, I just choose not to deal with it’. But, this actually carries with it the connotation of your responsibility of a situation. It’s accusatory in nature – you are to cultivate peace, pursue peace. That’s action inducing wordage.

Next we’ll look at

**SLIDE 4-5** Ephesians 4:26-27 (MSG) “*Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don’t use your anger as fuel for revenge.* ***And don’t stay angry****.* ***Don’t go to bed angry****. Don’t give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life*.”

Emotion accompanies conflict. You can feel mad or frustrated – but you don’t get to wallow in it. Again there’s the implication here of an inherent danger in settling in on a mood of anger. If there is a conflict, you can’t let it sit and fester – we’re to be proactive in resolving the issue.

Lastly, look at what Jesus said in

**SLIDE 6-8** Matthew 18:15-17 ESV “*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 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”*.

**SLIDE 9 (sermon-1\_1920X600.jpg)** This is a prescription for engaging in healthy conflict resolution. This doesn’t hint at an Instagram tirade or venting all your frustration to someone else. We’re to deal directly with the person. So no cop-outs on conflict resolution from a Scriptural perspective.

And if that’s the case, why, Jesus followers, do we still try to convince ourselves *if I ignore it, it will go away*? Here’s some reasons I’ve run into:

* You might be afraid of hurting offending someone if you bring up a touchy or awkward subject, so ignoring the situation is the easier option.
* You feel powerless to change it and you just might fail if you try.
* If you admit there’s a problem, the door to all the ugly and awkward you haven’t wanted to deal with will be flung wide open and that thought is overwhelming.
* OR (*and this one will sting*) You don't care enough about the people involved to see the conflict resolved.

These are all realities we deal with, but ducking under those covers and trying to ignoring what scares us isn’t the healthy choice. I’m convinced that we are instructed to not only engage in conflict resolution, but engage in a productive way because God knows what unresolved conflict can lead to. It festers: it hurts, and wounds, and leads to bigger and bigger issues.

Science backs me up on this. Refusing to deal with conflict leads to what are known in social science as destructive methods of dealing with conflict. Those will manifest themselves in escalation cycles and avoidance cycles.

Escalation cycles can be thought of in terms of a volcano – there’s a triggering event, that creates a pressure, and then the pressure builds and escalates, builds and escalates until finally there’s an eruption and Boom! Friendships end, you fail the nine weeks, you walk away from a job, families become estranged.

Avoidance cycles can be thought of as a pulling away. In Virginia we deal with shrink swell soil, where the soil swells when it’s wet and then shrinks when it dries out. Foundations built on shrink swell soil will eventually become incapable of supporting a structure properly. The foundation and the walls begin to crack and pull away from one another. So when a relationship gets caught in an avoidance cycle, the resentment and disappointment simmering below the surface cause people to begin pulling away from each other; there’s less and less direct interaction.

This leads to them becoming less dependent on each other.

Each person begins seeking someone else to share their feelings with.

Instead of having honest discussions with the person you have conflict with, you’re now confiding and relying on a third party.

Precious people – do you know how many relationships implode each year because of unresolved conflict?

If you Google “effects of unresolved conflict”, you’ll find articles and statistics pointing to:

* Increased absenteeism and turnover at work
* Shattered friendships and marriages
* Strained Parent/Child relationships
* Estranged family relationships
* Damaged relationships with neighbors, teachers, coaches, teammates

In other words refusing to deal with conflict can result in broken relationships.

Failure to engage in conflict resolution leads to relational discord. For those of you who are more analytical than touchy feely, I have outlined this mathematically.

**SLIDE 10 (sermon-2\_1920X600.jpg)** I made up the power to 10. I’m pretty sure its actually a higher number than that. But here’s the big take away for today – if you want to have good interpersonal relationships, you have to not only be willing to engage in conflict resolution, you have to learn how to be good at it.

So we’re going to adopt a new motto for today. The many reasons we tend to ignore conflict can be boiled down to this: we just don’t want to face the awkwardness of the situation. It’s awkward to confront people, its awkward to admit where you might have messed up, it’s awkward to hash things out. So today, we’re going to commit to embracing the awkward moment. We’re not going to let it have power over us anymore. In fact let’s just have a group empowerment moment. Introverts, you get to say this to yourself and then text a friend what we’re about to say. Extroverts, look at the person sitting next to you and tell them:

**SLIDE 11 “Embrace the Awkward Moment!”** My high school students are like, yeah and thank you for creating that one…

Once again, when we look to Scripture, we see examples of brave men and women who embraced the awkward moment for the sake of resolving conflict in a healthy, productive manner.

In 2 Samuel 12:1-13, we see read about a spiritual advisor named Nathan who confronts his boss, King David. When Nathan found out David had seduced another man’s wife, got her pregnant and then murdered her husband, he could have just ignored it. No one else was saying anything. After all, it’s awkward, you might get your head chopped off for questioning the king. But Nathan had enough love and respect for his leader that he was willing to embrace the awkward moment and engage him in an honest discussion. Next time you’re mad at your boss, just be glad that a murder/secret pregnancy situation is not the awkward moment you’re dealing with.

In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul tells us about the time he confronted his friend, Peter, who was a leader in the church. When Paul discovered Peter had starting refusing to eat with non-Jewish members of the church out of a social fear, Paul embraced the awkward moment and had a difficult conversation with his friend.

The Old Testament records for us the entire story of Esther. Esther had marital problems compounded with a threat to the safety of an entire race of people. Her uncle wisely counseled her and said, “*You’ve got to do something about this. You’re married to the King and you can help us through a national crisis. You can’t ignore this. The only thing putting your head in the sand will do is keep you from actually seeing when everything implodes around you.”*

Esther’s story is very interesting. At the time when her uncle informed her of the threat to the existence of the Jewish people, Esther is not in a good place in her marriage. The honeymoon had kind of cooled; there’s a tension between her and her husband and not only is she not wanting to deal with the awkward situation of lack of intimacy in the marriage, she, in all reality, can’t even legally approach him. He’s the King of Babylon – approaching the king uninvited carries a death penalty, even if you’re his wife. But she knows she can’t ignore what’s going on. She needs the King to intervene for her people and to do that, she has to go talk to him. She is literally going to take her life into her hands to broach a subject with a man she isn’t even sure has any interest in her anymore.

Can anyone relate to feeling like there is so much distance between you and someone else that you’re not even sure asking them to talk is going result in anything positive? Esther embraced a moment that was not only awkward, but dangerous. And because she did, she saved an entire nation of people. Sometimes it takes courage that is outside of ourselves to help us navigate a conflict situation. Esther is an example of God’s faithfulness in walking with us no matter what situation we are facing.

So let’s dive into some healthy methods of engaging conflict. How do we practically embrace the awkward moment? I’ll share with you a few things I’ve learned by bombing conflict situations and afterwards realizing, “*Ok, really doing the opposite of what I just did is what actually works*”.

**SLIDE 12** First, allow yourself time to respond rather than reacting.
 **SLIDE 13** Proverbs 14:17 (MSG) tells us “*The hotheaded do things they’ll later regret; the coldhearted get the cold shoulder*.” This may be my first tattoo. Responding means you take time to assess and think about how you want to act. Reacting tends to be on an emotional level where as response is more intellectual. Get control of your emotions so that you can respond thoughtfully rather than react emotionally. Followers of Christ, this gap is a great place to pray for clarity, calmness, and courage. Esther took 3 days to fast and pray. She asked others to do the same with her. That enabled her to put a gap between the problem and her response. She was able to focus on a solution rather than simply rushing into a stop-gap measure.

 **SLIDE 14** Second, approach every conflict with humility. With just about any conflict we have a tendency to establish blame. And quite naturally, we create, in our head, a blame graph. And if we’re honest it normally looks something like this.

**SLIDE 15 (sermon-3\_1920X600.jpg)** You may have a tiny bit of blame but the other person is clearly at fault. In reality, I know there are some weird exceptions, but in reality, most of the time, the blame chart really should look more like this.
 **SLIDE 16 (sermon-4\_1920X600.jpg)** In conflict, we can easily have blind spots. It’s why we need to take somehow time to put a gap between the situation and our response. Jesus gave us some good advice for how to deal with the blame chart.

 **SLIDE 17-19** Matthew 7:3-5 (NIV) “*Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye*.”

A healthy dose of humility can prevent you from approaching conflict from a defensive position. You consider the part you may have had to play. You’re instead ready to engage in awkward, difficult conversations knowing you aren’t always 100% right and ready to actively listen to where the other person is coming from.

**SLIDE 20** Third, beware of possible surface conflict. Real resolution occurs when you get to the root of the problem. Let me give you an example. You grab the milk and there’s that tiniest fraction left in there. Ugh! What do you do? Depending on if you’re an escalator or an avoider, you start yelling about milk or you sit and pout about milk, but the question is the same: *Why do you leave just the littlest bit in the fridge? Just finish the whole thing!* (Like the Spaurs, the Littles also have refrigerator issues. Welcome to our reality.) But that’s surface conflict. In reality, you’re not mad about milk – you’re mad because you feel devalued. Someone else left a mess for you to deal with instead of taking care of it themselves. That’s why you’re upset. But you won’t get there unless you engage in discussion and get to the root of your conflict.

**SLIDE 21** Fourth, look for the common ground solution. Since we live in the real world and not happy-clappy land, we all know that not every conflict situation is going to end well or even be solvable. However, you greatly increase your chances of productive resolution if you and the other person can look for common ground when working towards a solution. Verbalize the things you both want to help put that in perspective.

* “Mom, w*e both want me to do well in school.*”
* “*I know you and I are both trying to make sure we pay our bills on time*”

This isn’t always the case, I get that, but very often you and your conflict person do share some common ground. Focusing on that instead of what divides you can point the conversation in the right direction. And notice to even get to this point, you will have had to embrace the awkward moment and initiated a conversation.

Conflict resolution often craves candid conversation. And why not have the satisfaction of being the bigger person by being the one who initiates it?

Lastly, I want to share with you a commonly used method that can help you get a conflict resolution conversation started. It might be that you’re willing to embrace the awkward moment, but you aren’t sure how to begin. This is simple guideline for helping you choose words to engage in a conflict conversation. It’s called the S.E.T. method: that stands for Support, Empathy, and Truth.

Support is where you lay the ground work for the conversation with an “I” statement that demonstrates concern and a desire to help. “*I care about the group project*” “*I care about this office and the work that we do*” “*I care about your health and I’m concerned about you*.”

Next is Empathy. Its not just feeling sorry for someone: that’s sympathy. Empathy is saying you are aware of someone’s feelings and that they are entitled to how they feel. “*I see you’re mad and I understand how you might feel that way*,” “*This must be frustrating for you*.”

Now let’s pause. Offering supportive communication doesn’t mean you aren’t going to hold people responsible for their actions or for contributing to a solution, it just means you engaging in honest communication and ensuring that you are being heard.

Just because you validate someone’s feelings doesn’t mean you are agreeing with their version of events. You’re just letting them know “Hey, I recognize you have these feelings.”

The key is to respond thoughtfully and not reacting and jumping into defensive mode. When you’ve laid the groundwork for engaging in conflict resolution with Support and Empathy, you can then enter into Truth. And here is where you have to really Embrace the Awkward Moment.

Truth. When you have let the other person know that you support them and empathize with them, you have opened a door that allows you to share truth. Paul tells us in Ephesians that we are to speak the truth in love. Caring for another image bearer of God means you will be willing to share the reality of your concern, the reality of your feelings, the reality of the need for something to change. Depending on the situation, this is where you may need to give some truth statements in working towards a solution, like “*This is what I can do if* …,” “*This is what will happen when*…,”

**SLIDE 22** S.E.T. = Support, Empathize, Truth. Affirm common goals, empathize with the other person’s feelings, and then speak the truth in love.

Putting your head in the sand is like pulling the covers over your head and hoping that the “something” under your bed” will go away. It didn’t work then and it doesn’t work now. Pray for the courage to pull your head out of the sand and “Embrace the Awkward Moment.” Then put productive conflict resolution tools into action and pray for success.