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We are in our third and final week of our Stranger Exchanges series. I hope you have been encouraged to not run from awkward situations and conversations, but to stand tall and speak the truth. Remember, God may have brought you intentionally to that situation, because He wanted you to be the one to speak up for Him. Sometimes the conversations are awkward, because they involves bad news, other times it may be that God wants you to be the one to share the gospel with someone, sometimes it may just be that you don’t care too much for the person you need to talk to, and other times, it may be that you feel like you care too much about them. There are countless ways and reasons a conversation can be awkward or scary, but when God puts it in front of us, we need to take the opportunity to speak His love and His grace into those situations.

That includes situations like the ones we’re going to talk about tonight. Sometimes, the strange exchange comes from a point of accountability, conflict, and/or correction. I believe these types of situations are more difficult than ever, because we’re losing the ability to have conversations with people that don’t agree with us. There are many reasons behind this, but two particularly stand out to me. First, our society has gone from thoughtfully debating ideas to attacking the person with the ideas. It’s easy for us to maintain our position if we truly believe the worst about the person with opposing ideas. Second, instead of going to the person that disagrees with us directly, we go to people who do agree with us and demonize people with differing opinions.

I look around and see this sort of behavior everywhere, and it drives me crazy. When I see it in the church – and I do see it in the church – it doesn’t just drive me crazy. It grieves me. I’m so disappointed, especially when we’re doing this to other Christians. This isn’t the way God wants us to interact or treat each other. I want to look at the way we ought to handle disagreements, conflicts, and accountability in a loving, Christian way. I want to look at a story of a conflict between Peter and Paul. Who knows who Peter and Paul were?

They were both apostles, founding fathers of the church, missionaries, pastors, incredible Christian men. They had a serious conflict that arose out of inappropriate behavior. I want you to pay attention to what was being done, what was said, and the order in which the conflict was handled. These are going to be important.

Galatians 2:11-13 (NLT)

*"But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile believers, who were not circumcised. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn’t eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision. As a result, other Jewish believers followed Peter’s hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.”*

Paul was the one speaking here. He and Peter were ministering in the same town, and he noticed a problem. Peter originally ate with Gentile believers, but he had stopped. Now he was only eating with Jewish believers. He was only hanging out with people of his own race. What sorts of things do you think someone would say about Peter today if this was happening? Right. They’d call him a racist, maybe a bigot. They would immediately attribute the worst motives to his actions. Did Paul assume the worst about Peter? He didn’t! He rightly assumed Peter’s behavior changed, not because he came down with sudden onset racism, but because he was afraid. Peter was wrong to ignore the Gentile Christians for fear of what the Jewish Christians would say, but he wasn’t avoiding other races for more nefarious reasons.

I want to encourage you to be like Paul in this situation. We cannot assume the worst of other believers. Maybe the worst-case scenario is true, but we can’t know that or assume that until we talk to them. Jesus said in John 13:35 that people will know we are His if we love each other. Is it loving to assume the worst about someone?

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (ESV)

*"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."*

Although these words can be used to understand love in a dating and marriage relationship, these verses are not specifically about those types of relationships. These verses are about the way we ought to love and treat each other within the church. Verse 7 says that love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. These are written together, with bears and endures lumped in with believing and hoping. This verse is communicating that even in difficult times, even in disagreements, love will cause someone to believe the best about someone else and hope the best for them. Even when they do things we do not like, maybe even things that hurt us, we choose to believe the best about them while we get to the bottom of it.

That’s what Paul did. He didn’t assume Peter was a vile, racist piece of filth. He chose to believe there was something else behind his actions, and he turned out to be right. He rightfully assumed Peter was afraid. We do not like it when people attribute the worst motives to our actions and inactions. We should be careful to not do that to other people. Believe the best about other Christians out of your love for them. If you turn out to be wrong in your assumption, at least you will not have been wrong in your actions towards them.

Galatians 2:14 (NLT)

*"When I saw that they were not following the truth of the gospel message, I said to Peter in front of all the others, “Since you, a Jew by birth, have discarded the Jewish laws and are living like a Gentile, why are you now trying to make these Gentiles follow the Jewish traditions?"*

Then what did Paul do? He went right to Peter to express his concerns, to hold him accountable. He didn’t go to Timothy, Barnabus, Silas, or anyone else and say, “Peter is the worst! Wait till you hear what he is doing in Antioch!” He didn’t go to someone else with a gossip-based prayer request. “We need to pray for Peter, because it appears he might be racist.” He didn’t subtweet him. He didn’t write in his letter about this other so-called apostle who was being racist. No! He went directly to Peter and had what had to have been an awkward conversation. It would have had to have been awkward. Peter had been a Christian longer than Paul, was one of Jesus’ disciples, walked with Jesus in the flesh when He was on Earth, and Paul was going to have to tell him he wasn’t being very Christlike. Peter was already founding churches when Paul was killing people for being part of the church. But he stepped up and embraced the strange exchange.

Why do you suppose he would do that? Because he loved Peter. Not only did he believe the best about him, but he hoped for the best for him. Sometimes, when we truly hope the best for people, we might need to lovingly talk to them about ways they are not following Jesus and are limiting their ability to experience full life in Him. I can’t truthfully say, “I want the best for you,” if I’m willing to let you live in opposition to God.

Paul’s going directly to Peter reminds me of another potential awkward conversation. Sometimes we’ll go to a friend and fellow Christian, because they aren’t following God. Other times, we need to go to them directly, because they’ve done something to hurt us.

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."*

Too often, when someone does something that offends us, we’re quick to write them off completely. It doesn’t matter how long they’ve been a friend. It often doesn’t matter whether it was intentional or not. We just walk away from them. There may come a time when it is appropriate to walk away from someone, but that ought to be our last option, only after we’ve followed God’s outline for handling it first.

The first thing we ought to do is go to someone directly if they’ve offended or hurt us. I admit that this is difficult. I have had to do it, and it’s one of the hardest things to do. Part of that goes back to our attributing the worst motives to people’s actions. Part of it could be a fear of rejection; that things won’t get cleared up, because they actually don’t like us.

If they will not listen to you, the next step is to try again with someone else present. This should be someone you mutually trust, someone with wisdom. It’s good to go to a leader that both of you trust. Try to work things out with a witness who can serve as a calming presence and possibly mediate some. I have been in this role before as a youth pastor. I have had students sit with me that were having trouble with each other and worked through it. Sometimes it has worked out, and sometimes it hasn’t.

I’ll admit that it doesn’t always work out. It hasn’t always worked out in my own life. There are people with whom I am no longer friends. They hurt me, I went to them to speak to them about it, and they just didn’t care. I’m not mad about it anymore. It hurt at first, but I’ve moved on. I chose forgiveness over bitterness.

We have to develop a culture within our church and within our group where conflicts can be handled in a healthy manner. We have to love each other enough to give each other a chance to speak to what happened. We cannot assume the worst about each other. We should believe and hope for the best, and then go directly to each other to see what’s going on. It is scary, it is awkward, it can cause strange feelings. But if we truly love each other, and we really want to honor God with our relationships, we need to do it.

Let's pray.