

Jacob's Well**Lesson Title:** The Life of Paul—When Conflict Matters

Key Concept: Paul was highly influential in the early church, and examples from his life still guide us individually and as a church body. Paul's example demonstrates that when people's souls are at stake, conflict is a requirement.

**Scriptures:**

¹¹ But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. ¹² 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. ¹³ As a result, other Jewish believers followed Peter's hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ 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?"
(Galatians 2:11–14 *New Living Translation*)

Context Scriptures: Matthew 18:6, 15–17; Luke 5:31–32; 19:10; John 8:3–11; Romans 14; Galatians 1:8–9; 4:8–9; 5:12; 6:2

**Lesson Thoughts:**

Years after Jesus revealed himself on the road to Damascus, Paul, now an established disciple, arrived in Antioch in the middle of revival. God's power was moving, Gentiles were being saved, and the Spirit was speaking.

And then, an old, hurtful message returned. It was a message to those newly saved Gentiles, those babies in Christ. At its heart, the message was simple. "You aren't saved. You're not Jews, so God doesn't actually care about you." Paul had already spoken against this message to the church leaders in Jerusalem, and they had agreed with him, but this twisted message was back again.

Jacob's Well

Differences of opinion were okay within the church, and didn't automatically mean hostility. Jesus' description of how to handle conflict, after all, was measured and careful (Matthew 18:15–17). But Jesus was also the man who pronounced destruction on those who would hurt little ones (Matthew 18:6). His mission was to seek and to save the lost. He did not come to minister to the healthy, but to the sick. And this old message was preached *by* the healthy *against* the lost and sick.

With this understanding, Paul responded forcefully. In his letter to the Galatians, he twice said that anyone preaching against Jesus' true gospel should be sent to hell. He compared the preachers of this message to idolaters, and said they should castrate themselves. Eventually, with Paul constantly fighting for the truth, the gospel prevailed, and Gentiles were accepted.

The intense way Paul spoke and fought for the gospel is notable because it's so contrary to what we would expect. We're used to the gentle kindness of Matthew 18, the instructions to love one another and carry each other's burdens. And in most cases, it's okay to disagree with other Christians without fighting about it. Just as we follow the Spirit, we should trust that others are following the Spirit. Fighting oftentimes isn't constructive. But things change when people are being hurt and salvation is at stake. When that happens, conflict is not optional. When the lost souls of the world are at risk, conflict is a requirement.

**Discussion Questions:**

- 1) Romans 14 (written by Paul) says that in disagreement the strong should extend grace to the weak. How can we tell who's weak and who's strong?
- 2) Read John 8:3–11 and compare this story with Galatians 2:14. Why are these approaches to conflict so different? Is one better? Why?
- 3) All Scripture is God-inspired. So how does the violence and wrath of Galatians fit with our image of a loving God?
- 4) How do we decide when conflict is the appropriate response to a situation?

Next Lesson: Missionary Work before Prison

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- 1) Acts 15 describes Paul taking his conflict to the church, the last step of conflict resolution described in Matthew 18. The church agreed with Paul, but it seems that the conflict didn't go away. Matthew 18 instructs that, if that happens, you should treat the other person like you would a corrupt official. What does this mean in practice? Jesus was kind to corrupt officials, but he also didn't let them preach sermons. What's the balance?
- 2) Paul almost certainly lost opportunities and political standing in the church by fighting so vehemently against this hurtful message. Was it worth it? Would it be worth it to you? What would make it worth it? Consider if you would be willing to sacrifice opportunity and rank in exchange for defending people from other Christians.

Jacob's Well

Notes and Reflections, cont.