Conflict - Avoid & Deny

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Have you ever had an epic fail moment? Something that went so incredibly wrong that the memory of it has been permanently implanted in your brain. Maybe something that your friends are kind enough to remind you of when you’re together - “hey Robin, remember that time when… “ Yeah - something like that.

Well, when Pastor Wynne asked me to talk about conflict and my topic is avoid & deny, I was like, yeah, I got this (dripping sarcasm). I’m terrible at conflict and I’ve been known to deal with conflict in all of the ways we’ve talked over the past 3 weeks. Fight to win - of course - I know when I’m right and I want to be sure that the other person comes to that same conclusion. I won’t budge until they see the error of their ways. Head in the sand - listen, I don’t have to deal with what I can’t see - what’s wrong with that? Run and hide - if I’m running, I’m too worn out to care about the conflict so there is no conflict. Am I right?

I have so many examples of epic fail conflict moments, I wasn’t sure which one to choose. There was the time my college roommate moved out because of my snarky remark to her boyfriend. Or when I sat in a restaurant and cried like a blubbering fool when someone tried to deal with me on a conflict we were having. Or when I should have waited to get all of the facts before I vehemently defended someone who was clearly in the wrong. Oh the stories.

This is one of my favorites because it was just so bad. In college, I was required to do an internship as part of my degree. I met with my advisor, received the class materials, set up my internship & was off. 12 weeks of working in the field I was pursuing. I did all of the assignments on the syllabus as well as everything the internship required. At the end of my internship, I met with my advisor to turn in all of the work. I was super proud of myself - it was a self-directed class & I met all of the deadlines. The professor received my paperwork, shuffled through it, looked up at me with a frown & said “what you have is good, but you’re missing a large chunk of the assignment”. Umm what, excuse me? I did everything you told me to do. For which he hands me a paper & said, you should have done all of this as well. My fiery Italian side reared up & I was in full fight to win mode. We went back & forth, but he wasn’t budging, he would give me an incomplete until I did all of this other stuff. Since he was my professor & advisor, I went to the department chair, plead my case & was told the same thing, you have to do the rest of the work. I was devastated. We’re not talking a couple papers, but about 20 different major projects. I just completely wasted 12 weeks. I graduated college with that big fat ol’ “I” on my transcript. And I didn’t care. I made up my mind it didn’t matter. I graduated, walked across the stage, was finished and that was it. No one would see the grade so it didn’t matter. I went back to the department chair and try to get the grade resolved to no avail. And so I just decided that my fight to win mode didn’t work so I would just avoid & deny it. It wasn’t a big deal until it became a big deal when I decided to pursue further education. My choice to avoid & deny the situation had backfired & was back to rear its ugly head.

This story was obviously a few years ago, since I now have a son headed to college - I’ll let you guess how many years, but the memory of it is still clear. It was an epic fail conflict moment. I can look at it now and laugh (or groan), but in the moment, it was awful - it was all consuming - I couldn’t think about or talk about anything else. And I felt extremely isolated - I was trying to get people on my side and yet realized I was alone in this. I should have dealt with it at the moment, but instead I chose to drag it out over years because I was avoiding & denying the reality of it.

Have you had any epic fail conflict moments? Has it felt like this month since we started talking about conflict that you have had more opportunities to deal with conflict? Here is the good news - you are not alone! Conflict is something we all have to deal with. And even those who are “good” at conflict would probably say they’ve had some low points in dealing with conflict.

Conflict is nothing new to our world. There are some big conflict moments recorded throughout history. Pick up any American history book and you will see conflicts started over money, inheritance, land rights, property, greed, lust, misunderstandings, and plain ol’ pride.

Or pickup your Bible and start reading about Conflicts. It starts in Genesis and goes all the way through Revelation. The Book of Esther, which Sharon spoke about in week 2, is a story of conflict started by one man’s ego that could have turned into thousands of lives lost.

And believe it or not, there are stories of conflict in the bible that include Jesus. It can be easy in American culture to think of Jesus as this soft spoken, gentle, laid back pacifist - where in reality - he dealt with tough issues - had tough conversations - stirred up the religious leaders with his words - went against cultural norms and did crazy things like heal on the Sabbath and then challenge religious leaders to consider which is worse - to heal or do nothing.

Yes -Jesus dealt with conflict - even among those who “knew” him best. One story in particular is of an epic fail conflict by one of his disciples.

This fail so epic, it is recorded in all 4 of the Gospel writings in the New Testament. If you don’t have a Bible you can download the Bible app to your smartphone - simply search for Bible in Google Play or Apple’s App store. If you have the Bible app - add me as a friend by searching for Robin Harper.

Here is a quick background of the story. The first 4 books of the New Testament - Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John - are considered the Gospel writings. In each of these books, the authors wrote various accounts of Jesus ministry. Some of their stories overlap - but they were written from each person’s perspective. The story we are going to focus on today was documented by each of these writers - probably due to the magnitude of the event.

The references for this story are on the sermon notes so you can read the story from each author’s angle - but for today, I’m going to focus on the narrative as written in the books of Matthew & John. This story is mostly known as Peter’s denial of Jesus. (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, John 13, 18, & 21)

Ok - so right from the title of the story, you know this must have been big. The original readers of this story would have known the seriousness of this title. They all knew who Peter was - some may have even known him personally. He was kind of a big deal. One historical author states Peter was “enthusiastic, strong-willed, impulsive, and, at times, brash.” You can read the accounts of Peter in the New Testament and will probably come to these conclusions yourself about his personality.

So when Peter messes up - he does it big time. If you have a Bible or Bible App, you can follow along with the story in Matthew 26 - I’m reading from the New Living Translation

Matthew 26:31-35 Jesus Predicts Peter’s Denial

…Jesus told them, “Tonight all of you will desert me. For the Scriptures say,​‘God will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ ​But after I have been raised from the dead, I will go ahead of you to Galilee and meet you there.”​ Peter declared, “Even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you.”​ Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, Peter—this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me.”​“No!” Peter insisted. “Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!” And all the other disciples vowed the same.

Did you hear Peter in this? The ego, the pride - everyone else is going to bail on you Jesus - but not me, I’m your man. I’m gonna stick by you no matter what. He is so emphatic with his statement, Peter has to go a step further and say not only is he not going anywhere - but I’m with you to the death.

Even if you have never heard this story before you can already guess what’s happening next

Still in Matthew 26, jumping down to verse 69

We’re picking up the story after Jesus has been arrested.

Matthew 26:69-75 Peter Denies Jesus

69Meanwhile, Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant girl came over and said to him, “You were one of those with Jesus the Galilean.”

70But Peter denied it in front of everyone. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

71Later, out by the gate, another servant girl noticed him and said to those standing around, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.”

72Again Peter denied it, this time with an oath. “I don’t even know the man,” he said.

73A little later some of the other bystanders came over to Peter and said, “You must be one of them; we can tell by your Galilean accent.”

74Peter swore, “A curse on me if I’m lying—I don’t know the man!” And immediately the rooster crowed.

75Suddenly, Jesus’ words flashed through Peter’s mind: “Before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me.” And he went away, weeping bitterly.

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I think you get the reason why I’m calling this an epic fail. We might give Peter a bit of grace if he denied Jesus once - we could understand - it was stressful, he was panicked, so much is happening. But it’s not just once.

The 2nd time he backs up his answer with an oath. And the 3rd time - if he hadn’t dug himself a big enough hole - he then declares a curse on himself.

Oh Peter. I sorta feel sorry for the guy. I mean, I’ve made some big mistakes in my life - messed up big time. But I’m fairly certain none of my friends have sat down and documented the failure to have it published so the next 2,000+ years of readers can rehash and pick apart my actions. That is an introvert’s nightmare.

Considering the themes of this message series - let’s look at how Peter did all 4. Fight to Win - I would say the 3 denials are definitely a fight to win. He didn’t just answer, he was emphatic in his answer. Not just a simple No, but a definitive, I’m gonna call curses on my head if I’m lying sort of no. Head in the sand - Jesus was clear with Peter what was going to happen. Peter was completely oblivious. Instead of heeding the warning & making a change - he just pretended it wasn’t there - again in a very dogmatic “not me” sort of way. And then Run & Hide - he was hiding behind his words, behind his personality - he wasn’t about to be associated with Jesus and risk his own death.

So, how does Peter’s Denial fit with today’s topic of Avoid & Deny. Let’s go on with the story, which is the story of Easter. Jesus is accused, beaten, forced to carry his own weapon of death, nailed & hung on a cross, dies, and is resurrected. I know those are quick bullet points surrounding an event that literally changed the course of history. Lent, which are the 40 days leading up to Easter, starts on Wednesday, March 6 this year. I would challenge you to take those 40 days to learn more about the events that happened from Jesus being arrested through the resurrection. As a church, we will be reading “Journeying With Jesus - 40 Days Lent Devotional” on the Bible App. You can find the plan by following the information on today’s message notes.

Ok, so back to Peter. There was no time for Peter to apologize to Jesus, to deal with the conflict before his death. I guess Peter could have stood at the foot of the cross and shouted his repentance. It would have been very dramatic - but it didn’t happen. Peter was most likely present for the crucifixion - though not specifically mentioned. But for once, he was quiet. And in his mind, missing his chance to make things right. His avoiding the truth and denying his relationship with Jesus left him empty - hopeless.

We have talked a lot in this series about types of conflict and various ways to make things right. Hopefully by now you see the reasons for why there is conflict, and recognize in your own life the harmful effects unresolved conflict can have. I would encourage you to go back and watch the messages to get some good tips on how to deal with conflict.

Today, I want to take what we have learned in the previous messages and do some role play specifics that will give you some practical ways to deal with conflict.

I’ve asked Austin, to be my trusty conflict assistant today. I promised him that I wouldn’t do anything to embarrass him today. And while we never have conflict at our house (dripping sarcasm) I figured he & I could make up some conflict other people might have.

<<Conflict role play:>>

Austin, what are typical conflict situations you encounter each day at school, work, or even home?

Why don’t you pick a typical conflict we have at home & will do a little good / bad role play. (When he breaks curfew & I lose my marbles)

Ok, how about a conflict at work (schedule keeps changing)

I did an informal Facebook poll - thank you to all of you who participated in it. I asked what are typical conflicts that people have to deal with.

* Finances - from how to spend money to dealing with budgets
* Teenagers
* Selfish Behaviors
* Misunderstandings from ineffective communication
* Being overscheduled
* Assuming
* Expectations
* Faith differences
* Lack of trust

There are so many different causes of conflict and I think this list looks at the underlying issue of many conflicts. I’m sure we could think of more, but you get the idea.

When our expectations don’t match up to what we experience, it creates a gap. We have to make the choice as to what we are going to do with that gap. Are we going to chose to believe the best or the worst? Are we going to fight to win to make what we expect happen? Are we going to bury our head in the sand and just say “oh well, I guess it is what it is” or “that person will never change”. Are we going to run & hide? Or as I did in college, when what I expected - a class I thought I finished, didn’t line up with what I experienced - a stack of major projects to complete - just ended up avoided & denying it.

Now here is my disclaimer, just as I gave when I previously spoke about forgiveness. Conflicts are not an easy topic. There isn’t really a one-size fits most sort of approach to conflict. There are great resources available to help you with a specific conflict you are dealing with.

I’ve been reading this book by Doctors Henry Cloud & John Townsend called “How to Have That Difficult Conversation.” It’s an in-depth look at the cause of conflict and ways to deal with different types of conflict.

You may be dealing with a conflict that really needs some outside guidance and assistance.

On Friday nights at 7pm, there is a ministry here at the Courthouse Campus called Celebrate Recovery. This ministry looks at God’s healing power in our lives through the “8 Recovery Principles.” Conflict can bring pain and Celebrate Recovery is a great place to work through life’s hurts, habits, and hangups.

You may require the help of a professional counselor in dealing with conflict and the aftermath of conflict. I highly recommend Footsteps Counseling Center ([www.footstepscounseling.com](http://www.footstepscounseling.com)). Footsteps is a partner of Southside Church and has 4 locations in the Greater Richmond area, with a location here at the Courthouse Campus.

While we have put out so many different ways to deal with conflict throughout this series, we recognize that it can be scary, difficult, and sometimes even seemingly impossible to walk through conflict alone. Know you are not alone and there are resources to guide you.

Alright, so now we’re going back to the story of Peter. We’ve seen his epic fail - I mean when he crashes he does it big - and we’re still reading about it. Imagine how he must have felt. He knows he messed up. He has a memory & I’m fairly certain he replayed his conversation with Jesus & the denial over & over in his mind.

Can you relate with Peter?

We’re now going to the book of John to finish the story, because this is the only place the restoration of Peter is found in the gospels.

John 21:1-17

21 Later, Jesus appeared again to the disciples beside the Sea of Galilee.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+21&version=NLT#fen-NLT-26865a)] This is how it happened. 2Several of the disciples were there—Simon Peter, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin),[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+21&version=NLT#fen-NLT-26866b)] Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples.

3Simon Peter said, “I’m going fishing.”

“We’ll come, too,” they all said. So they went out in the boat, but they caught nothing all night.

4At dawn Jesus was standing on the beach, but the disciples couldn’t see who he was. 5He called out, “Fellows,[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+21&version=NLT#fen-NLT-26869c)] have you caught any fish?”

“No,” they replied.

6Then he said, “Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you’ll get some!” So they did, and they couldn’t haul in the net because there were so many fish in it.

7Then the disciple Jesus loved said to Peter, “It’s the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his tunic (for he had stripped for work), jumped into the water, and headed to shore. 8The others stayed with the boat and pulled the loaded net to the shore, for they were only about a hundred yards[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+21&version=NLT#fen-NLT-26872d)] from shore. 9When they got there, they found breakfast waiting for them—fish cooking over a charcoal fire, and some bread.

10“Bring some of the fish you’ve just caught,” Jesus said. 11So Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net to the shore. There were 153 large fish, and yet the net hadn’t torn.

12“Now come and have some breakfast!” Jesus said. None of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. 13Then Jesus served them the bread and the fish. 14This was the third time Jesus had appeared to his disciples since he had been raised from the dead.

15After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” Peter replied, “you know I love you.”

“Then feed my lambs,” Jesus told him.

16Jesus repeated the question: “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord,” Peter said, “you know I love you.”

“Then take care of my sheep,” Jesus said.

17A third time he asked him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Then feed my sheep.

Not exactly the conflict resolution story that I would have expected - and definitely not how I would have dealt with it. I was hoping for a tearful, expressive declaration of wrong and maybe a standing on top of the boat & shouting to all who hear sort of confession. It was very anti-climactic.

This account is from the 3rd time Jesus has been with the disciples following his resurrection. Jesus definitely didn’t deal with Peter as I think he should have. Why didn’t he confront Peter at one of the earlier times? Why didn’t he come out of the grave, wagging his finger and saying “See, I told you so. I said you would deny me, everyone heard it, and boy howdy did you mess up big time. Go with me to the grave, yeah, whatever”

While this is one of the most gracious stories of redemption, I shake my head at it and wonder, “why?” Didn’t Peter deserve a good tongue lashing. A giant screen in the sky that would play the scenes back in dramatic movie replay fashion. But that’s not how Jesus dealt with him. He asked him the same question 3 times, “Do you love me?”

When Jesus asks Peter the question, “do you love me?”, did you notice he started the question, “Simon, son of John”. He called Peter by his given name, not by the name Jesus gave him.

John 1:42

42Then Andrew brought Simon to meet Jesus. Looking intently at Simon, Jesus said, “Your name is Simon son of John—but you will be called Cephas” (which means “Peter”[).

Peter broke his relationship with Jesus. He willingly chose to deny Jesus, deny any knowledge or relationship with him. Chose to be just like everyone else, a part of the crowd. He chose to not be who Jesus had called him to be, Peter / Rock. Peter, in one decision, chose to go back to his old life - life before Jesus. Life before walking with the Messiah. Life before seeing miracles and healings. Life before freedom from sin.

Maybe Peter went fishing that day to bring back some normalcy - he knew Jesus was alive, had seen him, but nothing was the same. Everything had changed and yet Peter was back to his old self.

Remember my story from the beginning. I had resolved myself that I was ok with my decision for the class. I walked across the stage at graduation, was told I graduated, but there was one big looming thing over my head - that very expensive piece of paper that signified my graduation. I figured that when God called me to ministry, I would be the behind the scenes girl working in a support role and I was ok with that. Until I wasn’t.

I sat in a service here one Sunday and felt very strongly the Lord telling me to “finish what I started” and I knew exactly what that meant. I was to be an ordained elder in the church of the nazarene and that required a completed internship which sat on my transcript as that giant fat “I”. And so I had to go back to my college. By now the professor and department chair were long gone. So I had the fun task of explaining the entire story to the new head of the religion department only to find out if would be a long process going before a review board - who happened to be some of the same people I sat in class with years before. My choice to avoid & deny had blown up in my face. Talk about an embarrassing, humbling experience. I had to write a letter explaining the situation and in it I stated I would do whatever was necessary to complete the class. Oh & not only did I have to explain this to my school, I also had to tell the story to the advisory committee here on the Virginia District who was overseeing the ordination process. I’ve lost count of how many times I had to tell the story & how many people were involved.

Well, 23 years after I walked across the stage at my college graduation, I finally got that diploma, in hand. And because of that step, I was able to pursue ordination in the church of the nazarene and became an ordained elder in 2016.

Why do we avoid and deny conflict? Why do we chose to go back to an old life when we fail rather than work through the conflict, the separation? Why do people stand and proclaim their belief in Jesus, surrendering their life to him, and yet when times get tough, life gets hard, things don’t go the way they plan, they just walk away from their relationship with Jesus?

Have you ever considered that we not only have conflict with each other, but it is possible to have conflict with God.

How do we have conflict with God? Have you ever said:

God must be mad at me because of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I prayed but God isn’t answering me

I won’t pray because every time I do it seems like the opposite of what I pray for happens

I asked for forgiveness but I keep feeling so bad for what I did

God could never forgive what I did

I don’t even believe this God stuff, I’m just here to make mom happy

My professor said everything I’ve been taught as a child at church is a lie

I’m too smart, rich, educated, athletic, attractive - why would I need God - I have everything I need, and more

The list is endless as to reasons we have conflict with God. It’s funny, because we are so uncomfortable with conflict with our fellow humans - yet it is completely acceptable, even expected - to have conflict with the God of the universe - and not expect any repercussions of that conflict.

Yes, God is all loving, all knowing, all powerful, ever-present. He created all, sustains all, and put all into motion. And yet, he is so amazingly patient with us.

Did you see how Jesus handled the conflict with Peter? He just asks him a simple question. “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

So, while we’ve spent a great deal of this message series dealing with conflict with our fellow humans, we have to look at ourselves and consider our conflict with the God.

What is it in your life that has you in conflict with God?

What have you been avoiding or denying in your relationship with Jesus?

Have you proclaimed your faith in Jesus only to deny him when the pressure is on?

Today is a day of change - a fresh start - a time for you to settle this conflict with God and either start new with God, or return to the relationship you had with him before you walked away.

Response

When I was a freshman in college, I walked to the front of the church, kneeled at the altar, and poured out a lifetime of denying Jesus. It was the start of many trips to the altar as I learned of a life of total surrender to Jesus.

Today, I invite you to spend time talking to Jesus. The altar is a great place to come and accept the gift of his forgiveness. There are people who will come and pray with you.

There are response stations that you can use as well. There are papers at the cross where you can write down a care, concern, issue, confession and pin it to the cross as a visual representation of your surrender of this to Jesus.

There are candles that you can light to signify someone you are praying for or a prayer you are raising to Jesus.

The communion stations are available if you want to take communion as a reminder of what Jesus death on the cross means for us.

My prayer for you today is that when you walk out of here, you will have started the process of resolving a conflict you have with Jesus.