When we look at the New Testament, we are going to examine in this study the information about conflict from the Gospels and also from some selected passages in the epistles.

First Conflict in the Gospels. The earthly life of Christ was life filled with opposition and conflict. The religious leaders of His day strongly resisted what Jesus did and who He claimed to be. His teaching of righteousness directly clashed with the message of righteousness taught by the religious leaders. The Sermon on the Mount provides us with numerous examples of the clashes occurring between Jesus and the Pharisees (Matthew 5–7). Repeatedly, Jesus declared, “Ye have heard it was said, but I tell you.” Both the religious leaders and Jesus agreed as to the value of the law. The conflict was severe when the interpretation and application of the law was considered. However, instead of examining the conflict between Christ and the leaders of His day, we want to turn our attention to some of the conflict episodes which existed among Christ’s followers. In each of the following accounts, we will identify first the conflict issue and secondly what we learn about conflict.

Luke 22:24-27 says this, “Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest. Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.’ ”

The conflict issue was the question as to who was to be the greatest. Their perception of position was connected to importance or worth. The higher the position, the more importance would be attached to it. At issue was who would determine greatness.
Would it be decided by the world around them or was a different standard to be used?

**What We Learn About Conflict.** The conflict brought to light a deeper problem. Role definition was on their mind. Each wanted his own position to be more significant than his fellow disciple. Jesus redirected their role to that of a servant rather than a ruler or benefactor. His definition of leadership by servanthood was clarified since conflict was present. Conflict often helps us to unveil a deeper area needing resolution. What pastor has not felt the pangs of watching a fellow classmate pastor a church which grows by leaps and bounds while he continues to struggle with the same few people? But by what standard do we determine greatness? If faithful servanthood is the criterion, we need to be careful about confusing bigness with greatness. On the other hand, smallness is not to be confused with quality. Just because a ministry is small does not guarantee it is good. The closer we can become leaders like Jesus Christ, the less we will need to concern ourselves with largeness and smallness. Our calling is to be perpetually serving as we seek to minister for Him.

Luke 10:38-42, “As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!’ ‘Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘You are worried about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.’ ”

**The Conflict Issue.** In the Mary and Martha story, the conflict revolves around goals. Both women had good objectives in mind. Martha’s untiring service is commendable. Mary’s desire to hear the Lord teach and be with Him is equally commendable. The conflict enters when Martha determined Mary had made a bad choice. After all, there was considerable work to be done; and Mary was doing nothing. The behavior we exhibit which exposes the goals we possess can create a strong conflict in our interpersonal relationships. This account seems to indicate the conflict issue of perceived poor choices and incompatible goals.

**What We Learn About Conflict.** Role definition and expectation can be a battle zone for conflict. Each woman was reading the
situation differently. Conflict existed at the assumption level. Martha assumed since what she was doing was correct behavior, Mary should be doing this also. Sometimes it is easy to transfer our own goals and objectives upon another believer. If what I am doing is right, it must be right for you too. This is far deeper than the behavioral level. When I engage in such unspiritual thinking, I am forcing my set of goals, values, and attitudes on you. This can create a deep conflict which is not readily managed.

Emotional baggage is frequently a part of the conflict experience. This seems to appear most regularly when the combatants on either side of the issue both are partially right. Both Mary and Martha desire a good thing. It would be hard to fault Martha's serving heart. But who would tell Mary she ought not to listen to the Savior's teaching? We, like Martha, become more zealous when we know what we are doing is right—part of Martha's problem as she started faulting Jesus. “Don't you care?” was her complaint. Even Jesus did not seem to understand the burden she carried. The fact that He had not said something to Mary about not working showed Martha that He was not as concerned as He ought to be.

There are times when we all can quickly identify with Martha. Overworked and underpaid we can tolerate, but to be underappreciated is more than we can tolerate. Remember, Martha’s solution to somehow get Mary to work was not the direction Jesus took this conflict. Jesus wanted Martha to realize it is better to listen to the Lord than to just labor for the Lord. This is a valuable lesson even to the current hour.

John 12:1-8, “Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray Him, objected, ‘Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.’ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. ‘Leave her alone,’ Jesus replied. ‘It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of My burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have Me.’ ”
The Conflict Issue. The question raised by Judas Iscariot was, Why this waste? The issue was one of values. The potential money which could be realized from this perfume was of high value to Judas. He attempted to hide his avarice by referring to the poor. But the gospel writer reveals Judas as a thief who was far more concerned about wealth than worship. The issue was one of values and scarce resources.

What do we learn about conflict? Jesus defended the individual who revealed the better set of values. Conflict at time has a right side and a wrong side. It is not always a win-win situation. The issue of being in tune with God’s program compels a person to be associated with a definite position. To not identify with this side was to be clearly in the wrong. Conflict often reveals a hidden agenda. To Judas, the poor were of little value. But if less money was contributed, then he had less to steal.

Conflict, like a knife, can cut through superficiality to the essential elements involved in a conflictual episode. Conflict is dynamic, never static. Hidden agendas quickly start to appear when conflict starts stirring matters up. If the hidden agenda of a powerful board member is to place his future son-in-law in the newly created minister of youth position, no other candidate will have the right stuff. In some circles, this is referred to as church politics and should be banned from the planet earth. One of the benefits of conflict is to unmask the dishonesty of the person who tries to implement his or her secret plans. This conflict also shows us the source of conflict usually is over scarce resources: a fixed amount of money, time, people, space. These things provide the source of the struggle. We may rejoice when a $10,000 gift is given to the church with no strings attached, but it is nearly certain that conflict will come as to where, how, and when this money should be used. Immediately our values start to surface. Do we appreciate our relationship with God’s people more than we do our desire for such a large amount of money to go to missions?

Matthew 20:1-16, “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He
asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first they expected to receive more, but each one of them received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said. ‘And you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work in the heat of the day.’ But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first and the first will be last.”

**The Conflict Issue.** Perceived injustice is at the heart of the question. Why didn’t I receive more? The outcome was not what was anticipated. The worker reasoned, if the person working only one hour received x amount of money, then the person who worked eight hours ought to receive 8x amount of money. But the owner reasoned, I have the right to do whatever I wish with what is mine. The issue was over felt injustice. The workers assumed their expectations were mutual with the owner. Such mutuality did not exist.

What do we learn about conflict? Conflict often resides in our perspectives. We view the issue from only our frame of reference. Little to no attempt is made to understand how someone else might be viewing the same set of facts. This produces a deep-seated conflict since it exists at the level of definition and involves a basic value we call justice. Conflict also reveals the character of those who complained. Their contract was a legitimate one. If the owner decided to be generous to the latter workers, that was between the owner and those workers. The conflict was present because some workers made the whole payroll their business when only their check was legitimately their business. We live in a day when an overemphasis is placed on personal rights. The words “I deserve” fall from nearly everyone’s lips. Because our society is so “me” conscious, we can easily lose sight of the facts of any situation. The issue of ownership becomes lost in our zeal for perceived justice just as it did for these first-century laborers. Conflict forces us to think more clearly in the vital areas of living.
John 21:15-19, “When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’ Again Jesus said, ‘Simon son of John, do you truly love me?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Take care of my sheep.’ The third time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was hurt because Jesus had asked him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ He said, ‘Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.’ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, ‘Follow me!’”

**The Conflict Issue.** The commitment Peter had to his Lord was the theme of this repeated questioning. Christ was in the restoration business with Peter. Once Peter had denied his Lord, his life was never quite the same. He was not as quick to boast about his ability to be faithful. The issue seems to be one of commitment and restoration so that Peter can be the tool God has planned for him to be in the book of Acts.

What do we learn about this conflict? Conflict keenly focuses on past performance. It cannot be ignored or slighted. We cannot live in the past, but recognition of what has transpired must influence what is present and what will occur in the future. The account seems to be a reinstatement of Peter to his leadership position. Individual responsibility springs from this narrative. When engaged in conflict, personal ownership of words and behavior is absolutely essential. In this dialogue, it is noteworthy that the stronger person, namely Jesus, came to the level of the weaker person, namely Peter. To move to the other person’s level should not always be deemed as weak or wrong. The instructional purposes of Christ with Peter were connected with the process, not necessarily with the product. Too often in conflict, we are blinded by the desired outcome that is a win for me. And we miss the value of the process that is a learning experience for both of us.

Next we turn to conflict in the epistles. Consider Romans 12:9-21. The following five points flow from these verses of Romans 12.
First, this passage seems to be setting an environment where destructive conflict would be less likely to occur. The commands of this passage, when obeyed, will produce strong, powerful relationships between believers. This counsel would eliminate conflict, but it would be managed well if these alliances were allowed to develop from these imperatives.

A second point in this passage centers on the personal responsibility each believer has for being at peace with all men. Your ability to identify with other people will help to establish this position of harmony. Harmony is sometimes misunderstood and thought to be unanimity. It would be a very dull sound in music if all we had to play was middle C. Harmony in music is difference without discord. For example, a standard musical chord consists of a C, an E, a G, and another C. Many people do not comprehend that you can differ with someone without going to war with this individual. We would do well to educate our leaders that difference is expected if we are to have a healthy, harmonious relationship.

Point three from this passage is concerning persecution. Even when faced with those who are persecuting you, the words are “bless and curse not” in verse 14. The imperative mood suggests that it is not optional. The power to do this must come from the Lord. But we must remember that when He commands, He also provides the power to help us obey that command. The issue may center on how much we desire His purposes to be lived out in our lives.

The fourth area of concern tells us that God’s child is to be governed by what is right, not what is revengeful (verse 17). The ugly side of conflict is not to be evident in God’s child. The temptation to fight using the same tactics as the ungodly is always present. But how we behave in conflict is still to be regulated by what is right. Our God is presented as the Creator, the Builder of the universe. Satan is the destroyer, the one who attempts to tear down what God is building. In conflict, we need to consider whether we are helping God or helping Satan.

Point number five: This point looks at motivation. God’s child is to continually be motivated by what is good. He or she is to allow room for the Lord to repay vengeance rather than to take matters into his or her own hands. The ability of God to set the record straight is far greater than our puny efforts could accomplish. In a very real way, we are to conquer the evil around us by the goodness God enables us to do. This is not possible apart from the
Holy Spirit. He must energize us if this goodness is extended to those who seek only our ruin.

Consider 1 Corinthians 6, the first eight verses. These verses highlight two basic truths pertaining to conflict.

1. The issue of conflict in Corinth surfaced in many, many ways. One conflict episode involved going to law before unbelievers when, in fact, these believers should have been able to judge these earthly matters. The context where the conflict should have been managed was inside the body of believers, not outside before the unbelieving world. Churches today seldom think of themselves as courts. Yet there does seem to be a legitimate judicial function of any body of believers. We need to be careful as to how quickly we abandon the collective judgment of the family of God. Conflict should not drive us to outside unbelievers but should serve as an opportunity for believers to adjudicate their own problems.

2. The second basic truth has to do with the depth of the problem. This problem was deeper than these believers imagined. Not only should one of the least of the brethren be able to judge the disputes, but Paul asked the question, “Why not rather be wronged?” Why not rather be defrauded? They failed to realize that their relationship with their brother was more important than the issue which caused them to consider secular legal proceedings. The intensity of conflict can cloud our judgment and cause us to operate with confused value systems. A well-established priority system must be in place before entering the conflict arena.

Consider Galatians 2:11-21. We learn several important truths from this passage concerning conflict. First, Paul wrote of Peter, “I opposed him to his face” (verse 11). The confrontation was made in person. Correction sometimes demands a face-to-face encounter over wrong behavior. To not have conflict with Cephas over this issue would have been wrong. It was absolutely necessary. Most people do not enjoy a face-to-face confrontation pointing out that a brother or sister is wrong. But where it is needed, it must be
done. Our attitude and manner of approaching the confrontation must include a “speaking the truth in love” as Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus. If we only have harshness with our brother, that comes from truth only. If we possess only love, we will not see the issue correctly as is needed.

A second point in this passage has to do with the preaching of a spurious message or not preaching of such a message. For in Peter’s case it wasn’t his message, it was his behavior. Most of the situations we encounter are more related to behavior than belief or doctrine. Inconsistent activity was what drew the rebuke Paul gave to Peter.

Third, it is important to note that Cephas was a leader. Leadership is a privilege not to be taken lightly. More is expected of a man in his position.