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## FIGHT CLUB? Genesis 13

Did you know that 80% of the world's lawyers live in the United States? There are 15 million suits filed in this country every year. In one of them a Florida pastor and his wife sued a guide dog school because a blind man being led by one of their graduates stepped on the wife's toe at a mall. They sought \$160,000 in damages.

Sadly the church is not immune to the flood of conflict. I read recently about a sad church conflict. Two high school kids in the church played on their school baseball team. They got home late on a Saturday night from a tournament and didn't have time to wash their hair that night or the next morning. So both of them wore their baseball hats to cover their hair at church the next day. Some in the church weren't happy with this, but understood the situation and said nothing. However, the boys kind of liked it so they wore their hats in church the next week and the week after. This led to a group of people being unhappy. They didn't think the boys should be wearing those hats in church. Some of them complained to the pastor. He couldn't see any biblical reasons for this being wrong so was inclined to do nothing about it. But the next week the groundswell of opposition grew. He went to the boys and told them he saw nothing wrong with it, but explained it was upsetting some people. He asked if they would mind not wearing the hats. They complied, but their parents got mad about the fact that the pastor did this. Quite a few people in the church joined them in their unhappiness. In the end, 15% of the congregation left the church over the baseball cap issue. If you think that's bad, I also read about a church that split over the positioning of the piano bench. It was so bad the pastor wouldn't even speak to one of the associate pastors.

A few years ago there was a movie out called *Fight Club*. It was not a great movie, and certainly not one I would recommend. But the title could be given to the human race, for it sadly fits us all too well. Fights happen. And they happen everywhere, all the time. How should we deal with this? We will get a picture this morning as we look at a potential fight involving Abram in Genesis 13.

## WEALTH LED TO CONFLICT

Abram had considerable flocks even when he first came to Canaan, and then God had blessed him with more. He took his detour into Egypt, and while it proved to be a spiritual and relational disaster, it was a financial win. He left Egypt with yet even more animals, the source of his wealth, than he had arrived with.

Lot, Abram's nephew, had been tagging along with his uncle and was reaping the benefits. God had promised not just to bless Abram but anyone who blessed him. Lot was in that camp. So he also became the owner of a large number of various animals. But this led to a problem. Abram had his huge herds and flocks all trying to eat off the land, and Lot had his huge herds and flocks also trying to feed off the land. The inevitable result was there simply wasn't enough land to go around.

To give a modern urban dweller an analogy I am going to envision a future. I warn you that this future is about as likely to occur as one that includes unicorns. In this future the Chargers have relocated, but not to LA. They are playing in a new stadium downtown near Petco Park. I told you this was fanciful. It gets even more fantastic. It is a Sunday in late October and the Padres are playing...wait for it...a World Series game. Yes, in this fanciful future the Padres are in the World Series. Meanwhile the Chargers, whom many have picked to win the AFC and go to the Super Bowl, are undefeated in their first 7 games and playing the also undefeated Los Angeles Raiders. Yes, I know, a more likely future scenario will include scientists discovering that reindeer really can fly, but go with me on this.

In this scenario, with a Charger-Raider game and a Padre World Series game occurring at the same time, what is going to happen downtown on that Sunday? Parkageddon! It will be the end of the world as we know it. There will not be enough parking spaces to go around on that Sunday. Do you suppose there will be any friction between Charger fans, Raider fans and Padre fans who are all trying to park their cars? You can be sure fistfights would break out over scarce parking spaces. Parkageddon, the result of skyrocketing demand and totally insufficient supply, would be a horrific mess. Well Landageddon, the result of skyrocketing demand for pasture for animals and an insufficient supply, was nearly as bad. Verse 7 says quarreling arose between Abram's herders and Lot's. Arguing and maybe even some pushing and shoving occurred between Abram's shepherds and herdsmen on one hand, and Lot's on the other. It was a series of conflicts that threatened to blow the family apart. Just like that future success of both the Padres and the Chargers would lead to problems, so the success of Abram and Lot did.

Most of us want success and more wealth. But this incident reminds us that where wealth and success are abundant there will likely also be envy, jealousy and especially conflict as people fight for their own interests. My mother appears as though she is going to live forever, a fact for which we are thankful. But the statistics tell us at some point her days on this earth will end. When that happens do you suppose there will be wrangling over her estate? I assure you, there will not

be. I'd like to think our family's love for each other would keep that from happening no matter what the circumstances. I think that's true, but I also know that even if it weren't true there would be no conflict over the estate. That's because there's nothing to wrangle over.

A big time contrast to that is what happened in the family of one of my college roommates. His name was Miles, which should immediately clue you that he was from a wealthy family. Hardly anyone but rich people name their kids Miles. It's like Carter, Orson or Alistair. Anyway, his family was conspicuously wealthy. They had a big home in a very upscale area of west LA where they employed a staff of servants. They also owned a huge "weekend home" that was right on the sand on a private island up in Balboa Bay. They had lots of money. Unfortunately the largest part of their wealth came from Miles' mother. A few years after we graduated from college she committed suicide. That was obviously tragic enough in itself, but it got worse. She left two wills. One left all her money to her husband. The other ordered it to be divided equally between her husband and her three sons. Since they were family you'd think they'd discuss that and together decide which was the valid will, confident that it didn't matter because they'd all look out for each other. You might think that, but you'd be totally wrong. It ended up in court with the three sons suing their father in an effort to enforce the will that included them. The wealth meant there was going to be big time conflict.

You're probably aware that Albertson's merged with Safeway and Von's, but to do so they were required to sell some of their stores. They sold them to Haggen's. I just saw in the newspaper that now Albertson's is suing Haggen's because they claim they haven't delivered millions of dollars that the deal required them to give. When there is money at stake it is not uncommon for people to fight.

This is not to say that wealth is inherently bad. But it is to say that it is dangerous. An interesting question for us all to consider is if you had to make a choice which would you prefer, to have a lot of money but be estranged from the closest members of your family, or to have little or no money but tight, loving relationships with your loved ones? Those two things are not mutually exclusive, but it is important to ask yourself what really matters to you if for no other reason than to remind yourself of what is important and what isn't.

#### ABRAM GAVE PREFERENCE

How would they resolve the problem? They could do what humans have mostly done throughout history and fight it out. Alternatively they could flip a coin or do rock, paper, scissors. Or Abram could have said, "Look, Lot, you've tagged along

this whole time. Nobody asked you to come. So I'm staking my claim right here and you're going to have to move on." He could have played the God card. "God told me to come here and promised to give this land to me. Has he promised any of this land to you? No? I believe we'd better do what God says, which means you have to move."

Abram didn't do any of that. Showing remarkable humility and grace he said according to verse 9, "If you go to the left, then I'll go to the right, and if you go to the right, then I'll go to the left." In other words, he gave Lot the right to choose whatever he wanted. Abram resolved the conflict essentially by saying, "You have your way. It doesn't matter to me where I end up. I want you to know that I love you and want to look out for your interests. So pick whatever area works best for you, and I will go somewhere else. You choose." He chose not to insist on having his way. Instead he did what Lot thought was best for himself.

Lot looked around and noticed the land to the east in the Jordan River Valley. At that time that area was green, well watered. It would make ideal land, Lot decided, for pasturing his animals. Furthermore there were some established cities there that would provide him with markets and with a little bit of civilization. So that's where he chose to go. Abram then said he would stay in the area where they were living in Canaan.

Lot chose to live in a city called Sodom, one that is notorious today. Verse 13 tells us "the people of Sodom were wicked and continually sinning against the Lord." Lot receives heavy criticism because he didn't care about that. Some say all he cared about was wealth. Some of that criticism is deserved, but maybe not all. It wasn't like the people of Canaan were exactly admirable. They were better than the people in the Sodom area, for sure. However, it wasn't like Lot had a choice between black and white and he chose black. He had a choice between black and charcoal gray and he chose black.

Remember that in 2 Peter 2:7 the apostle Peter referred to Lot as "a righteous man who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless." Lot may have made his choice merely on the basis of what could be financially most beneficial to him, but he was not a purely worldly man. Peter says he was righteous!

## GOD'S PLAN HAPPENED

Abram stays in Canaan, right where God had planned for him to be. God had already promised Abram that he would give that land to his future descendants. Briefly that seemed in possible jeopardy. What if Lot decided he want to stay right

there? Abram would have had to leave the area, thus apparently messing up the plan.

But now Abram was going to stay in Canaan. In verse 15 God told him, “All the land that you see I am giving to you and your offspring forever.” That is not the first time nor will it be the last that God gives him that promise. But it is significant here. The situation seemed to threaten God’s plan. Yet now the plan is secure and moving forward. What did Abram do to guarantee that happened? Did he dig in and say, “God is giving this land to me. Nothing is going to stop me from getting this land for my descendants”? No, he did nothing of the kind. He did absolutely nothing to insure that he would be able to stay in that land. In fact, he took a step that seemed to put it at risk. He essentially offered it to Lot, willing to take whatever Lot decided. He really didn’t do anything, but God did everything. Somehow it worked out exactly the way God planned.

Abram trusted that God could make things work out for him. He trusted that wherever he ended up God would bless him so he didn’t have to scheme, finagle, manipulate or demand his way. Neither did he worry about staying in the land God promised him. He trusted that God would work out fulfilling his promises.

## IMPLICATIONS

### GIVING PREFERENCE IS IMPORTANT FOR RESOLVING CONFLICT

God cares about us being at peace with each other. Romans 12:18 says, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live in peace with everyone.” As far as it depends on you means do everything you can to be at peace with people. You can’t control them so you can’t force peace to happen, but you can control you and make sure you do whatever is possible to be at peace with others. Romans 14:19 says, “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace.” There it is again, make every effort. Do all you can. If you make every effort that means there is absolutely nothing left that you can do to be at peace with someone. You’ve done everything possible with all your ability. Ephesians 4:3 says, “Make every effort (there’s that phrase again) to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” 1 Thessalonians 5:13 commands us to “live in peace with one another.” After encouraging the Philippians to live worthy of the Gospel in Philippians 1:27 Paul continued and described what that means. In 2:2 he said, “being like-minded, having the same love (for each other), being one in spirit and of one mind.”

In his autobiography, former Army General Colin Powell said when he speaks he often tells a story that happened on the eve of battle during Desert Storm, the first Gulf War. An ABC News correspondent named Sam Donaldson was interviewing

a young African-American soldier who was part of a tank platoon that was about to enter combat. Donaldson asked, "How do you think the battle will go? Are you afraid?" The young soldier answered, "We'll do okay. We're well trained." Then he gestured toward his buddies around him and said, "I'm not afraid because I'm with my family." Several of his buddies then shouted, "Tell him again. He didn't hear you." The soldier repeated, "This is my family, and we'll take care of each other."

Powell said that story never fails to touch his audiences. In fact, he said it never fails to touch him. That's because it speaks to a longing deep within all of us to belong to a group of people who love each other to the point where they would do anything for each other. As much as we Americans treasure and protect our individualism, there is something even stronger in us. It is a desire that is part of being human, regardless of our nation, culture or race, to belong, to be a part of a cohesive, loving group. God has placed that desire for unity and oneness in us. That's because peace, love and unity are a part of his character. Those things are important to him because they are part of goodness. Since we are made in his image the desire for them is there in us.

That is certainly what the church is supposed to be. It is the place God wants us to experience real unity. But we all know there will be constant threats to that kind of oneness. How are we supposed to be of one mind? I can't even be of one mind with my wife, whom I love to death. She is committed to some things that I just can't go along with. Her commitment to coffee and to chocolate are ironclad, I would say almost to the point of addiction. And I'm sorry, but I just can't go there. I hate coffee, and chocolate is generally just too bitter for me. We have people in this church who are, if you can believe it, Oakland Raider fans. I'm not going to name names, but it's true. We are not going to be of one mind on that deal. We have people in this church who have no interest in sports whatsoever. They are fans of no teams at all. We're not on the same page.

What can this mean? Clearly being of one mind doesn't mean that we agree on everything. What it means is that we agree on what does matter and are happy to humbly and graciously disagree about things that don't. We agree that Jesus is Lord and that we are all loved and accepted by God only by his grace. We agree that we all want and strive to be like Jesus. We agree that it is crucial that we love each other as he loves us. These are things that matter, and we should be of one mind about them. So while we may disagree about coffee, chocolate, teams we are fans of, political parties we belong to, type of music we enjoy, whether it is all right to wear a baseball hat in church and an infinite number of other things, we do

not let those things become divisive issues between us. In the end we are of one mind about the fact that they don't matter compared to having Jesus as the Lord of all of us.

Unfortunately the fact that we don't agree on everything means that conflict is inevitable. Just because people are godly doesn't mean they won't have conflicts. Paul and Barnabus disagreed about whether to bring John Mark along with them on their second missionary journey. Barnabus wanted to bring him even though he had flaked out on them during their first trip, but Paul didn't think they could count on him. Acts 15:39 says, "they had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company." The Greek word translated "sharp disagreement" is *paraxusmos*. We get our word paroxysm from it. In other words, these two guys were adamant about their two positions, and they weren't exactly cool and collected in expressing them. In the end they parted company and went their separate ways because of the argument over John Mark. It happens.

Laurie and I found out early on that conflict is a part of loving another person. We ran into it while planning our wedding. We got married in the ancient past when the now trite and clichéd "unity candle" was fairly new. That's where the bride and groom each take a candle representing their individual lives and use them to light one candle thus visually representing the two becoming one. From Laurie's side of the family came a new wrinkle. They wanted to have her parents and my parents walk up at the beginning of the service and light the two candles representing us. I was more judicious and tactful in expressing my opinion about that idea than I will be today, but I thought that was a sappy and hokey idea and said "no way on God's green earth. We're not doing that." We loved each other, but even the act of getting married resulted in conflicts. It was through those conflicts that I learned about the power of the magic words, "Yes, Dear."

Those who counsel and deal with conflict resolution will tell you that people have various methods of dealing with conflict, many of which are exceedingly unhealthy. Avoidance, denial, automatic surrender, commitment to winning are all damaging. But Abram shows us a powerful tool for resolving conflict. It is simply this: not demanding your own way but seeking the good of the other person.

James 4:1 reveals a powerful and crucial truth. "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" We don't like to hear this, but it says that all of our quarrels, all of our conflicts, all of them, are driven by our own personal desires. There is something we want and we perceive this person as keeping it from us. So we have conflict.

***Every conflict we have exists because we are not getting something we want!***

That desire could be for power and control, it could be for money or some possession, it could be for recognition, it could be for love or to be treated with kindness, it could be for sex. The number of things we can desire is nearly infinite, and every single one of them holds the potential for producing conflict if we perceive that someone is keeping us from that thing we desire. Remember that every single thing you desire holds the potential for causing conflict with someone.

If there is no such desire, there will be no conflict. Laurie had a desire that a certain element be in our wedding, I had a desire that the wedding not have that thing in it. If Laurie had never desired that thing, there would have been no conflict. Yes, I know, if I had said I didn't care and had no desire either way that also would have ensured that there was no conflict.

Imagine the power of doing what Abram did, which is to not live for one's own desires, but to live to benefit the other person! In fact, this is exactly what we are called to do. Philippians 2:3-4 says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." No selfish ambition. In other words, no being dedicated to promoting yourself, gaining control for yourself, having your own way, getting what you desire. Instead, consider others and their desires more important! Make it more important to bless, give to, serve and love the other person than to get what you desire.

## CONFIDENCE IS THE KEY TO GIVING PREFERENCE

The example of Abram and Lot reveal that Abram had something that enabled him to so graciously give up what he might have desired. It is that he knew God was going to bless him. He knew that God was going to give the land of Canaan to his descendants. His foul up in Egypt has taught him that God would keep his promise, so Abram didn't have to fight to get the blessing he desired. God would give it to him.

This idea applies to us as well. The thing that can set us free from the need to demand that we get what we desire is when we are confident that our sovereign, loving, good God is looking out for our best interest. When we are confident that nothing any person can do is going to keep us from experiencing God's will and his blessing in our lives, then we don't have to fight to make it happen our way. In short, when we believe that what God supplies is enough, we don't have to fight to get it for ourselves and take it from other people.



We need to remind ourselves of what we really desire. What has God called us to desire? Two things: First that we do the will of God and bring glory to him. Second that we love, give to and bless other people. James 4:7 says in the context of dealing with our quarrels, "Submit yourselves, then, to God." Seek what he seeks.

When these are our desires that completely changes how we deal with conflict. What person is going to try to stop you from loving them and blessing them? Can anyone stop you from doing the will of God and glorifying him? No, never. They might stop you from glorifying him in some specific way.

When our kids were young they used to play all kinds of games with the neighborhood gang. Carissa and Toby would be out there for baseball games, football games and hockey games with Cyrus, Chris, Sergio, John, Tony, William and the rest. One of the most persistent elements of those many games was arguing. They did have their conflicts, and they were over almost every play in the games. They each had their desires and those desires produced quarrels. But the kids always wanted me to come out and play with them. On a number of occasions the teams would end up being Carissa and me on one team and four of the boys on the other. This would produce an initial argument from Carissa. "That's not fair, Dad, there's more of them than us!" I would say, "Don't worry about it Carissa, I'll even things out." Inevitably an argument would start over the outcome of some play and I would say, "Carissa, just let it go. Let them have their way." She would say, "But, Dad..." and I would interrupt and say, "Carissa, I will see to it that we win. This play doesn't matter, because I can make sure we win." Knowing that Carissa would give in and the conflict would end. For us, God says he is with us and he will provide all we need. Abram understood that and was therefore able to tell Lot, "take whatever you want," and there was no more conflict. As we trust God to provide what we need there will be much less compulsion to battle with others.

## CONCLUSION

Conflicts will come. So when we find ourselves in the battle what should we do?  
**MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO BE AT PEACE.**

Laurie and I have been using some workout videos lately. One of them was a maximum effort workout. The trainer said that in the last part of the exercise you should be going so hard you are about to give out, that you have nothing left. I found out a couple of things about that. I tend to not go quite that hard. I have this subconscious fear that I'm not going to have enough to finish and if I push too hard something bad will happen. So my natural habit is to hold a little back.

There are two things we should remember about those commands to make every effort to be at peace. The first is that they call for maximum effort. You should have nothing left. The second thing is that peace is a goal that is more important than reserving something for yourself. We need to see how great a value God puts on us being at peace.

### DESIRE WHAT GOD DESIRES

What is driving your need to fight with this person? Is that really what you want in life, or do you want to honor God and love the person? When you have a conflict, when it is brewing and when you are in the middle of it you need to ask what it is that is driving it. What desire are you pursuing?

Then you need to reorient yourself. You need to say, “What I desire is to consider this person more important than myself.” That’s not in your estimation of yourself and the other person, but in your caring. This is God’s command. It is not a suggestion or an alternative. It is God’s will for you. So your goal in the conflict should be to care for the other person. Give up serving your desire, and serve God’s will.

### COUNT ON GOD

We saw last week that Philippians 4:19 says, “my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.” We don’t have to scratch and claw to get what we desire because God promises to give what we need. Psalm 37:4 says, “Take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.” That doesn’t mean delight in God and you’ll get everything your little heart has ever desired. I desired to be a great athlete, no matter how much I delighted in the Lord, it didn’t happen. I have been having a protracted battle with lateral epicondylitis for a couple of years. Oh, no, is it...is it terminal? Now, that’s doctorspeak for tennis elbow. It is so bad at times I have trouble even holding a razor. I have desired for it to go away and leave me alone and tried everything to make that happen, including prayer. It’s still there. No, David mean the Lord will give you what you really desire, peace and joy in your heart.

What makes us able to give up our desires is our confidence that God will supply what we need. Imagine a group of kids at a table looking at a plate of cookies and there are more kids than cookies. What happens? The kids get focused on getting a cookie for himself or herself. Ah, but what if mom says to the kids, “there are more cookies. I’ll make sure that you get all you want.” If the kids believe her there will be no mad scramble, no bickering over who gets which cookies. They just wait for

mom to give them what they desire. So it will be with us. The absolute key to dealing with conflict is knowing that God will supply what we need.