

Handling Controversy Skillfully

Today I want to talk about how to handle controversy skillfully because I'm sure you've noticed that civil discourse has pretty much disappeared in America. People seem unable to agree to disagree. You are either with us or against us and if you're not with us, you're not just wrong, you're evil. Everything has become personal and we're not allowed to not have an opinion; so most people just keep their mouth shut. Why alienate a friend or ruin a family gathering or get identified with a position you don't even agree with? Yet silence doesn't work either. We don't like feeling like a coward or pretending to believe something we don't. Too agreeable is just as destructive as too disagreeable. We lose respect for ourselves and others lose respect for us because they can't trust us. Do you really agree with me or are you just avoiding conflict? And remaining silent is often immoral. Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor and author writes, "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." Silence carries a high price both personally and collectively. Personally we sacrifice our integrity and eventually don't know who we really are. Collectively our silence gives greatest influence to the loudest and most extreme voices and make effective problem solving virtually impossible. Christians in particular can't avoid controversy. Jesus calls us to be His ambassadors and promises that the people who hate Him will hate us and people who love Him will love us. If we follow Jesus, controversy and conflicts are inevitable. It's not a question of if but when. So how can we wisely handle the inevitable controversies and conflicts which following Jesus will get us into? We do what Jesus did. In Matthew 22, we find Jesus in the last days of His life. He is surrounded by His enemies who are trying to trick Him into saying something they can use to have Him arrested or to discredit Him with the crowds in Jerusalem. Today I want to look at three debates Jesus has with His opponents and at three skills we learn from Jesus about how to handle controversy wisely.

1. In the first debate, we'll learn to be alert for either/or arguments
2. In the second, we'll learn to challenge assumptions
3. And in the third, we'll learn to build agreements instead of arguments

And what I hope you'll see is that if we follow Jesus' example, we can be open and transparent about what we really believe without – in most cases – alienating the people we're arguing with; and possibly even move them closer to Jesus.

The first skill we observe in Jesus in handling controversy wisely is to be alert for either/or arguments. A couple of weeks ago, I competed in my first swim meet in six years and I was pleasantly surprised with the results. I placed second in my age group; second out of two. I really didn't go for the competition. Swim meets are a great time to connect with the people on my team. There's really nothing else to do but talk as you wait for your next event and one of the guys told me all about his divorce which he described as amicable and how he and his wife were trying to lessen the impact of their breakup on their kids. He wasn't asking for advice and I don't know him or his situation well enough yet to have anything worthwhile to offer so I just listened and asked a few questions. But when he left to check on our lane assignments for our next race, my friend, Brandon Heath who is one of Creekside's middle-schoolers and who had overheard our conversation asked a very perceptive question. "Should people get a divorce or stay in an unhappy marriage?" That's a great question, isn't it? And it's a tough question because neither alternative is a good one. How do we deal with an either/or question when we really can't support either side? Let's see what Jesus does. "Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words." Now that Jesus has cleansed the temple, He has become even a greater threat to the religious

establishment who are now desperate to get rid of Him. However, Jesus enjoys the support of the common people and so His enemies plot how they can trick Him into saying something that will either alienate the general population or get Him into trouble with Rome. *"And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"* (Matthew 22:15-17) This is a bi-partisan delegation. The Pharisees were pro-Israel fundamentalists and the Herodians were supporters of King Herod, Rome's puppet king. So this delegation is like a temporary coalition of far right Republican and far left Democrat congressional members who join forces against a common threat. And they ask Jesus a question these two groups argue about constantly; is it lawful (according to the Law of Moses) to pay a poll-tax to Caesar? The poll tax was a small tax everybody paid annually just for the privilege of living under Roman rule. If you had six people in your family, you paid tax on all six. The Pharisees argued that the Law of Moses forbade the tax while the Herodians were more realistic. "Look, the Romans are here, what else are we going to do? So what do You think, Jesus? Should we to be loyal to God and resist paying taxes to a foreign ruler who claims he himself is a god or do we submit ourselves to Rome?" It's a clever question because like in most either/or arguments, there's no right answer. If Jesus says, "Yes, it's lawful to pay taxes to Caesar," He immediately alienates the Jewish population and if He says the tax is unlawful, He will be immediately charged with inciting revolution against Rome. *"But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?"* (Matt. 22:18) Jesus knows this is a set up. *"Show me the coin for the tax."* *And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away."* (Matt. 22:19-22) Why do they marvel? They are amazed by how easily Jesus avoids their trap. They ask Him an either/or question with either answer getting Jesus into serious trouble but He comes up with a third option. But even more amazing is Jesus' revolutionary view of God and politics. As far as I know, this is the first time anyone in history talks about God and government as separate authorities. *"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."* Jesus says that some things belong to Caesar but some things belong to God alone. Up to this point, rulers of every nation ruled by divine consent. A king was in power because God or the gods had put him in power or because he or she was a god. Either way, to oppose the king was to oppose God. But Jesus says that Caesar and God are separate from one another and therefore, while the Jews pay taxes to Caesar whose image is on the money they use, they owe ultimate allegiance to God in whose image they are created. And if there are conflicts between Caesar and God, we must choose God. Jesus introduces what will become the basis for political freedom centuries into the future; the rule of the individual's conscience over the rule of any human ruler; because our ultimate duty is to God, and never to the government. So what do we learn about skillfully handling either/or arguments from Jesus? Be on the alert for those times when you're only given two alternatives and you can't really agree with either, and ask yourself, does God have anything to say about this? Look for a third alternative. Either/or arguments almost always oversimplify an issue. The truth is usually more nuanced. When Brandon asked me if you should divorce or remain in a bad marriage, I told him that neither divorce nor a miserable marriage is God's plan according to the Bible and the only way I knew how to have a happy marriage was by following Jesus as Lord of our home. I am so selfish that if Christ wasn't in me, I would make any woman's life miserable but Jesus gives me the desire and the power to treat Laurie the way He has treated me and Laurie treats me the way Jesus has treated her. Because of Christ, there's another option besides divorce or being stuck in a miserable marriage. The lesson for us in this first debate then is to be alert for either/or arguments and when we find them, to ask, "What does God have to say about this and how would Jesus answer this question?"

The second skill in handling controversial issues skillfully is to question assumptions, the unproven beliefs upon which the opposing argument rests. The next question leveled at Jesus comes from the Sadducees; the wealthy, powerful aristocrats who controlled the Temple and the Priesthood; and who along with their bitter rivals, the

Pharisees, made up the ruling Council of Israel. The Sadducees believed that only the first five books of the Old Testament – the books written by Moses – were inspired by God while the Pharisees accepted the entire Old Testament; and since the Sadducees based everything on the books of Moses, they didn't believe in life after death or angels or the resurrection, while the Pharisees believed in them all. Jesus is just as much a threat to the Sadducees as He is to the Pharisees and so as He teaches in the temple, the Sadducees approach him with one of their favorite arguments against the Pharisees' belief in the resurrection. *"The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.'" (Matt. 22:23-24)* The Law said that if a man died childless, then his unmarried brother was obligated to marry his brother's widow and their first son would carry on the deceased brother's name and his family's property rights. The Sadducees pose with a hypothetical question. *"Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her."* (Matt. 22:25-28) The Sadducees argue that it is impossible to believe in the Law of Moses and in the resurrection at the same time. If this hypothetical woman and her hypothetical husbands live forever, then she finds herself in the position where obedience to the Law in this life makes her an adulteress in the next. Isn't it obvious that not only does the Law of Moses not teach the resurrection but is there was a resurrection, the Law would be broken? *"But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching."* (Matt. 22:29-33) The Sadducees' argument against the resurrection only works if you assume that life in the resurrection will be like life today and if you assume that the Law doesn't teach the resurrection and Jesus says those two assumptions reveal the Sadducees neither understand the Scriptures or God's power to create whatever He chooses to create. First Jesus says that life in the resurrection won't be like life today. Marriage will not exist in the age to come. I don't think that means that if you're married you won't have the relationship with your mate you have now. If anything, we will have a far more loving, intimate relationship than we have now. But because we are like Jesus, we will have that relationship with everyone. We'll be like angels. Jesus denies the Sadducees' first assumption that life in the age to come will be like life now. Then He goes to their more fundamental assumption that the Law doesn't teach the resurrection and takes them back to Exodus 3 – in the books of Moses which they claim is the only Word of God - when God first speaks to Moses in the burning bush. God introduces Himself to Moses, "I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." even though it's been over 400 years since Jacob died. Now if Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob no longer existed as the Sadducees believed, God would have said, "I was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," instead of "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," which according to Jesus means that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are currently alive since God is not the God of the dead but of the living. Jesus' bases His entire argument for the resurrection on a single word from Exodus 3, the word, "am." "I AM the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Jesus obviously believed that the Scriptures were more than a compilation of human authors because He asks the Sadducees if they haven't read what God said to them in Exodus 3. And Jesus believed that the very words of Scripture were from God because He bases His entire argument for the resurrection on a single verb tense. So what do we learn from Jesus about handling controversy skillfully? When someone seems to have an airtight argument which you know is wrong but you can't figure out why, ask "What unproven facts have to be assumed for this argument to be correct?" One argument against Christianity I often hear goes like this. "I could never be a Christian because of all the evil Christians have done in the name of Christ: the Crusades, the Inquisitions, slavery, persecutions of those who disagree with the Church and all the religious wars. Christianity has caused so much suffering so how can it be true if God is a God of love?" And it's true that much evil has been done and is still done in the name of Jesus. But

what's the unproven assumption that must be accepted for that argument to work? That real Christians were behind the Crusades, slavery, and religious wars – that the people who did those things were living consistently with what Jesus taught. But the apostle John writes in 1 John, "By this we know we have come to know Him, if we walk as He walked." Can you see Jesus slaughtering Muslims in the Crusades or selling slaves or going to war to convert people? Just because people do stuff in the name of Christ doesn't mean they're Christians. Jesus warned that many would call Him Lord yet not know Him. The argument that Christianity must be false because of all the suffering it has caused, like the argument of the Sadducees against the resurrection, rests on a faulty assumption. Or let's bring the need to question assumptions a little closer to home. Your teenager tells you that she and all her friends are invited to a coed sleep over at her best friend's house. Her parents will be there, all the other parents are ok with this and she wants to go too. What's the unproven assumption, parents? That what other kids get to do, my kid should get to do. And that assumption has got a lot of kids into a world of trouble. When in doubt, ask yourself, "What must I assume to be true in order for this argument to make sense – and is there anything wrong with that assumption?"

Let's look at Jesus' opponents' third attempt to trap Him and a third skill in wisely handling controversy which we learn from Him; building agreements instead of arguments. *"But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. (This time the Pharisees send an expert in the Law of Moses to test Jesus and get Him to say something they can use to discredit Him.) "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" (There are 613 commandments in the Law including moral laws, civil laws and ceremonial laws. The rabbis taught that certain laws were heavy, meaning they always had to be obeyed while others were light, meaning you could bend the rules occasionally. And the rabbis were constantly debating which commands were the heavy laws and which were the light; which were the most important and which were the least? So once again the lawyer's question reflects a current controversy of that day. But how would a question the experts couldn't agree on be a test for Jesus? We need to go back to the Sermon on the Mount. Throughout that sermon, Jesus would say, "You have heard" or "You have read" and then quote the Law of Moses; and then say, "but I say to you." You have heard that "You shall not commit adultery" but I say to you, whoever looks on a woman to lust has already committed adultery with her. You have heard, "You shall not murder" but I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother is guilty of murder." Jesus is explaining what the Law really requires in contrast to the way the rabbis had watered it down but if people didn't listen to Him carefully, they could get the impression that Jesus was setting Himself above Moses. So the Pharisees' hope here is that Jesus will answer that His commands are the greatest commands and supersede the Law; which will alienate the entire Jewish population.) "And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matt. 22:34-40) Jesus quotes the most familiar and beloved passage from the Law for every Jew; the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4-5, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one God. And you shall love the Lord thy God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." By every Jewish front door, there was a little box and inside that box was this passage which every orthodox Jew would stop and recite daily. Jesus goes to the heart of the faith and what every Jew agreed upon; that the chief obligation of every person is to love God. And then Jesus adds a second commandment from Leviticus 13, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," and explains that every other command is simply the application of loving God and loving your neighbor. Jesus completely disarms His opponents by going to what they already agree on. In the gospel of Mark's account, the lawyer who asked this question is immediately won over. He says, "You're right, Teacher; to love God with all your heart and soul and might and to love your neighbor as yourself is far more important than all sacrifices and rituals!" And Jesus replies, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." The goal of both Old and New Testament are the same; loving God and people. The New Testament simply makes it possible. So what do we learn from Jesus about handling controversy skillfully? So often our focus in an argument is to prove we're right and the other side is wrong. But*

have you noticed that approach rarely works? Your spouse or your roommate says, "You always leave the dishes in the sink!" What's your automatic response? "No I don't. "Yes, you do!" And nothing gets resolved. But if you begin with what you both agree on, you can often find a solution. "I know I left my dishes in the sink this morning and I apologize. I like everything to be cleaned up before we leave just like you do. But I had an early appointment and was late and had to get moving. In the future, I'll try to get started earlier." You start with agreeing with whatever you can before you bring up where you differ. In the previous example, you might say, "I agree with you; horrible things have been done in the name of Christ and that any religion that causes suffering and robs people of their human rights is evil. However, Jesus said that many would do things in His name that He would not approve and so Christianity must be judged on the basis of its founder and those who actually follow what its founder said." And then you would talk about the difference between being religious and actually knowing Christ. Build agreements rather than arguments. The role of the persuader is to show that not much persuasion is actually necessary; that we are far closer to one another than we might imagine.

Now there's one last conversation in this section. Jesus has silenced His enemies and now in vs. 41-45, He asks them a question. *"Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." (They knew their Bibles. The Messiah was to be a descendant of King David) He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) calls him Lord, saying, (in Psalm 110) "The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions."* Jesus asks, "How can the Messiah can be both David's son and David's Lord?" The Jews believed Psalm 110 to be a Messianic psalm about God seating the Messiah at His right hand until the day that God makes Him Lord of the entire earth. So why, Jesus asks, does David under the inspiration of the Spirit refer to the Messiah as my Lord since He is David's son and David is the king? The only person a king would address as his Lord is God and that is Jesus' point. The Pharisees thought the Messiah would be simply another human but the Old Testament teaches that the Messiah will be both the human descendant of David and God in human flesh. That's why Isaiah 9:6 says, *"For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; (That's the idea of the Messiah: a human who will govern the world for God. However, He is more than human because Isaiah continues) And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace."* Isaiah predicts a human child who will also be God and that prophecy is fulfilled in Christ. Jesus is the Son of David, but He is also the Son of God; fully human and fully divine. Jesus is not content just to silence His opponents. He takes them to the real issue: who He really is; because how we answer that question answers every other question. If Jesus is who He claims to be, God in human flesh, then everything in the Bible is true regardless of whether it agrees with our culture or our assumptions or with what we want to believe or not. If Jesus is God, then we need to be saved from our sins and there's nothing we can do to save ourselves. The good news of the gospel is that what we cannot do for ourselves, Christ does for us. He lives the life we failed to live so that God can credit us with His perfect record of obedience when we put our faith in Him as our representative. He dies the death we deserve to die, bearing the just punishment for our sins on the cross so that God can pardon every person who trusts Jesus as Savior. He rises from the dead in our behalf so that all who put their faith in Him can share in that resurrection and live forever. Jesus is the heart of Christianity. We become a Christian by putting our faith in Him and trusting Him to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

