

Families constantly deal with conflict. Part of it is just the relentless challenge to be nice to people you live with day in and day out. More substantial conflicts come from ideals; for example, when children choose different positions in politics, morals and religion. Or they bring over a friend who doesn't quite fit in with the clothing, hairstyle or vocabulary you prefer. Sometimes kids feel uncomfortable about the friends their parents make.

Hearing from people who hold a different viewpoint can be enriching; fresh opinions help us critique the habits we're in or the future we'd like to see. But there is always a danger – sometimes we cave in on principles we hold because of some other attractions, whether they are physical or monetary. We see this all the time with decisions people make about sexuality, drug abuse, cheating, and theft. They choose to do wrong because a different person's viewpoint is too strong for them.

The first Christians faced a conflict between Jews and Gentiles. This was an old dispute based on ethnicity. We see similar problems today from immigration to housing to jobs to schools. In today's first reading Paul and Barnabas were on mission in the area we now call Turkey. They worshipped at a synagogue one Sabbath. The hosts invited Paul to speak, so he told of Jesus' life and death, and invited them all to have faith. Some believed; others did not. The leaders contradicted Paul and Barnabas. So, since these Jews were rejecting the message, Paul and Barnabas preached to the Gentiles. The Gentiles were delighted at the news of salvation, but the synagogue hosts then persecuted Paul and Barnabas, forcing them to flee for their lives. But they just went to the next city and started preaching there. The first Christians welcomed someone different – they turned from the Jews to the Gentiles.

This was a little dangerous for the early Christian family because the Gentiles didn't quite fit in: they worshiped idols, sacrificed to gods, ate ritual foods, and neglected circumcision. All this had to be sorted out. You sometimes found within one family people who became Christians and people who did not. You can imagine the problems this caused: the emotional confusion in families trying to cling to their values – what do we believe, and what do we expect people to believe if they are going to be members of this household?

Paul gives some advice, which still applies to conflict in Congress, the Mexican border, or the bedroom of your home. He says, "remain faithful to the grace of God." That was it. It doesn't seem like much, but there's a lot packed in there. He did not say, "remain faithful to doing things the way you've always done them," nor "remain faithful to the new ways you are now hearing about," but instead, "remain faithful to the grace of God." God offers grace to improve a situation. Sometimes that means doing what we always thought was right; other times it means accepting new ideas. In the midst of a conflict, it helps to look for a third thing – not what I want, not what you want, but what God wants. We learn what that is through prayer, conversation, reading the bible, and keeping a peaceful spirit. Sometimes then the conflict goes away; sometimes it stays. But either way, the grace of God will remain.