

RESOLVE

A 6-WEEK STUDY
ON BIBLICAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION



CHAPTER 1

CONFLICT: IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK

TRUST IN THE LORD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND DO NOT LEAN ON YOUR OWN UNDERSTANDING.
IN ALL YOUR WAYS ACKNOWLEDGE HIM, AND HE WILL MAKE STRAIGHT YOUR PATHS.

- PROVERBS 3:5-6

As we seek to deepen our relationships with one another, conflict is unavoidable. At the first sign of conflict in your community group, you may be asking yourself, "Why was I ever matched with these people?" or "Did I make a huge mistake getting in this group?" As you have tough conversations and experience conflict with others in your group, it may be tempting to want to 'take your ball and go home.'

As God's people, we are called to respond to conflict in a way that is remarkably different from the way the world deals with conflict. We believe conflict provides an opportunity to glorify God, serve other people, and grow to be like Christ.

Healthy community groups commit to responding to conflict according to biblical principles since we are called to maintain "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). As believers, we are called to actively pursue genuine peace and reconciliation instead of accepting premature compromise or allowing relationships to wither. We are called to "forgive others as God, through Christ, has forgiven us" (Ephesians 4:32).

As we will see in the following pages, we are called to keep short accounts with one another (Ephesians 4:26); to take responsibility for our own contribution to the conflict (Matthew 7:3-5); to go show our brother his fault (Matthew 18:15); and to seek reconciliation (Matthew 5:23, 24).

Followers of Christ should be committed to resolving conflict in a way that glorifies the Lord, edifies the body of Christ, and reflects His character. Applying these principles is a matter of obedience.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How was conflict handled in your family growing up?
2. How have you handled conflict/miscommunications in the past with friends?
3. In your experience, has the church failed to handle conflict differently than the world? Explain.
4. Discuss ways that conflict can glorify God, edify the body of Christ, and reflect His character.
5. Based on the materials and Scripture referenced above, are there any conflicts that you are not currently stewarding well? Explain.

CHAPTER 2

CONFLICT: A CONSTANT OPPORTUNITY

SO, WHETHER YOU EAT OR DRINK, OR WHATEVER YOU DO, DO ALL TO THE GLORY OF GOD.

- 1 CORINTHIANS 10:31

If you've ever taken a zoology class you may have heard of the fight-or-flight instinct, which describes a behavior common to nearly all animals—when they encounter stress or a perceived threat, they will either run away or turn and attack. A possum plays dead. A deer darts away at an unfamiliar sound. A wild hog charges its opponent.

Interestingly, people tend to respond in similar ways. If we're honest, when we're hurt or offended by someone, our natural reaction is to physically or emotionally withdraw from that person, or to become angry and aggressive toward them. We attempt to protect ourselves or assert our own dominance. James 4:1-3 explains that this comes from our selfish desires and passions within us. However, as the redeemed body of Christ, we are called, in humility, to think of others above ourselves (Philippians 2:3), and to bring glory to God in everything we do (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Conflict is not necessarily bad or destructive. Even when conflict is caused by sin and causes a great deal of stress, God can use it for good (Romans 8:28-29). As the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1, conflict actually provides three significant opportunities. By God's grace, we can use conflict to:

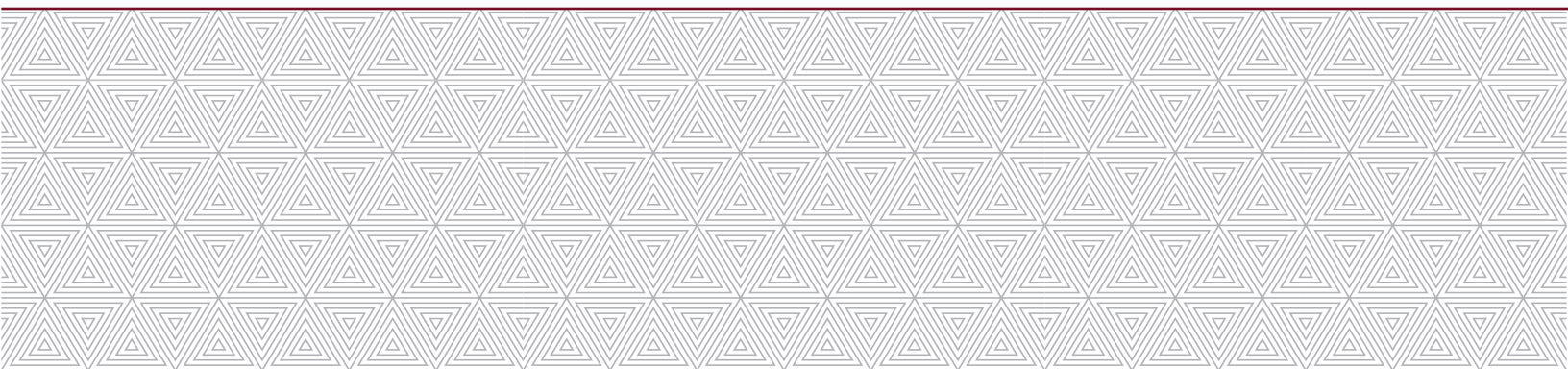
- Glorify God (by trusting, obeying and imitating Him).
- Serve other people (by helping to bear their burdens or by admonishing them in love).
- Grow to be like Christ (by living in obedience to God's word).

These concepts are totally overlooked in most conflicts because people naturally focus on escaping from the situation or overcoming their opponent.

However, in view of God's great love for us, we can reject the urge to fight or take flight, but instead, we can begin to look at conflict from God's perspective—understanding it is not necessarily something bad, but perhaps an opportunity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Most people will exhibit both the "fight" and "flight" at different times, but will have a preference toward one. What is yours? How has that specifically played out in the past (e.g., shutting down, making cutting remarks, raising your voice, using hurtful words, etc.)?
2. How does it change your perspective to think of conflict as an opportunity to glorify God, serve others, and grow to be like Christ?
3. What are some ways that handling conflict biblically would help you grow to be more like Christ?





CHAPTER 3

CONFLICT: GET THE LOG OUT OF YOUR OWN EYE

FIRST TAKE THE LOG OUT OF YOUR OWN EYE, AND THEN YOU WILL SEE CLEARLY TO TAKE THE SPECK OUT OF YOUR BROTHER'S EYE. – MATTHEW 7:5

Have you ever wanted something really badly and it seemed like everywhere you looked, other people were getting it or already had it? For example, let's say you're considering buying a new car. Suddenly, it seems every 5th car on the road is the same make and model you've been eyeing!

The truth is that the number of cars on the road hasn't suddenly changed; it's that our brains are focused on one specific vehicle, and everything we see, hear, or read is running through that filter. Likewise, we are subconsciously ignoring all the other vehicles that are not the one we have our hearts set on.

Similarly, our way of looking at things is far more affected by our own biases and predispositions than we care to admit. Each of us has a tendency to magnifying another's faults while minimizing our own.

It's important to understand this as we consider the call to "go and tell [our brother] his fault" (Matthew 18:15). In fact, that's why Jesus encouraged us in Matthew 7:5, "First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." Jesus doesn't say "Don't get the speck out of your brother's eye," but rather to examine ourselves first, before we go.

When examining ourselves and trying to see our own "log," we're generally looking for two different kinds of things. First, there are our own attitudes and biases. For example, maybe we are prone to hear something as being much more hurtful than was actually communicated (negative interpretation). Or maybe we are holding this person responsible for an old wound, and therefore anything he/she does is perceived as rude and insensitive (bitterness).

Secondly, there are sinful words and actions. We need to take responsibility for these, ask for forgiveness and repent from them no matter how small we think they are. It may be easy for us to say, "Well, I may have raised my voice, but that doesn't excuse him from being a complete jerk!" We would do well to flip that around: "He may have been a jerk, but that doesn't excuse my yelling."

The final and most important step in this preparation process is to identify the real issue, since attitudes and behaviors are just symptoms of a deeper heart-issue. The root issue may be an unhealed wound, a sinful desire, or even a good thing that's been elevated to a sinful place—all from which Christ wants to set us free.

Removing our logs is exceptionally difficult because the person trying to detect and diagnose the problem may be part of the problem. This is where we must lean on God's Spirit, God's Word, and God's people to help us see what we can't see. Sometimes, in the process of removing the log from our own eye, we find that the offense against us is really nothing, or much smaller than we initially thought.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever gone to someone to address a hurt or sinful behavior and discovered in the process that you were more in the wrong than you thought? Describe the experience.
2. What are the common root issues that you deal with that cause many of your conflicts?
3. Celebrate someone in your group who has handled conflict well. Take some time to point out the specific ways you saw them faithfully seek reconciliation.
4. What are some practical steps that you have found helpful in seeking to "take the log out of your own eye"?

CHAPTER 4

WHAT'S THE MOST LOVING THING TO DO?

AND ABOVE ALL THESE PUT ON LOVE, WHICH BINDS EVERYTHING TOGETHER IN PERFECT HARMONY. — COLOSSIANS 3:14

Most of us at some point in our lives have been asked, “what’s wrong” and have answered “nothing,” when in fact there were emotions churning deep within that we were unwilling to disclose.

Sharing our feelings with one another is an integral part of a healthy relationship. If we hide feelings of hurt, anger, or frustration, it is impossible to have the relationships that we desire. Therefore, when negative emotions—hurt, fear, resentment, etc.—present themselves, it is critical that they are dealt with in a healthy manner.

Common responses to negative emotions include minimizing them, trying to ignore them, or prematurely declaring them resolved. We say things like, “I’m just making a big deal out of nothing,” or “I should just give that up to God.” This rarely has the desired effect, and often resentment begins to boil beneath the surface.

Therefore, when conflict presents itself, we must realize there is no middle ground: we must either overlook the offense or be willing to discuss with the offender directly.

OVERLOOK AN OFFENSE

If the offense is a matter of personal preference or opinion, it can often be most loving to dismiss it (Proverbs 19:11). Sometimes, after we’ve removed the log from our eye, we see that the offense against us is really nothing, or much smaller than we originally thought.

Choosing to overlook an offense means trusting that God, who always judges justly (1 Peter 2:23), has a plan to make that hurt right, and that we don’t have to exact justice ourselves. It means we choose to believe the best about the other person and remind ourselves that we have been forgiven of much ourselves (Luke 7:47).

When deciding if an offense can be overlooked, here are four helpful questions to ask:

- Is the offense dishonoring God?
- Has it damaged a relationship?
- Is it hurting other people?
- Is it hurting the offender himself/herself?

If the answer to all of these is “no,” then we should let the subject go and move on. However, if the answer to any of them is “yes,” then we should make preparations to go and discuss the matter with them.

GO AND BE RECONCILED

If we’ve been trying to overlook the offense for days, weeks, or months, and it’s still irking us, we should consider that perhaps this is God’s way of prompting us that we need to go and talk it through with the other person.

The reason we go and discuss an offense with another person is never to prove a point or shame them. By contrast, our goal should be honest communication—even to the point of exposing our own hurt—that promotes reconciliation so that a deeper, more authentic relationship might result. In effect, we’re saying, “I need you to know how this made me feel, so that we can learn/repent/forgive and move forward together.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of things do you tell yourself to avoid sharing your hurt with someone else?
2. What is an example of an offense that you would overlook, versus one you should go and discuss directly?
3. Practically, how do you proceed in overlooking an offense? What Scriptures can you meditate on to get your heart in the proper place?
4. If the goal is reconciliation rather than trying to “prove a point,” how should this alter our approach?



CHAPTER 5

GO AND SHOW YOUR BROTHER HIS FAULT

IF YOUR BROTHER SINS AGAINST YOU, GO AND TELL HIM HIS FAULT, BETWEEN YOU AND HIM ALONE. IF HE LISTENS TO YOU, YOU HAVE GAINED YOUR BROTHER. – MATTHEW 18:15

Having done the hard work of discovering our part in the conflict and determining that the offense is too serious to overlook, it is time to take action. God's Word commands us to go and talk with our brother privately and lovingly about the situation.

We should prepare for the conversation specifically by:

- Praying for humility and wisdom (1 Peter 5:5).
- Planning our words carefully – thinking of how we would want to be confronted (Proverbs 12:18, 15:1-2; 16:23).
- Anticipating likely reactions and planning appropriate responses – rehearsals can be very helpful (Proverbs 20:18).
- Choosing the right time and place – set aside time to talk in person (Proverbs 16:21; 27:12).
- Avoiding text or email for anything emotionally charged.
- Assuming the best about the other person until we have facts to prove otherwise (Proverbs 18:17).
- Trusting God (Psalm 37:3).

Practically speaking, it's good to initiate the conversation and share some ways that God has revealed to us our own shortcomings. To the extent that these have negatively impacted the other person, we should discuss any hurts we may have caused, accept their feedback, and ask for their forgiveness. Starting the conversation this way sets a tone of humility — one that can be contagious—and removes any sense of condescension or judgment. This should not just be an obligatory apology, but a humble admission that, in the eyes of an infinitely holy God, our sin is just as offensive as theirs.

After we've addressed our own contribution to the issue at hand, we must gently and truthfully share how we've been hurt by the other person. It is important to be factual and specific, not to exaggerate or over-generalize. We should be clear and straightforward in relaying not only the incident that caused the hurt but also our feelings related to it. We should affirm our love for them and our desire for reconciliation and unity.

If the initial conversation does not resolve the conflict, we should not give up, but invite one or two others along in another attempt to be reconciled (Matthew 18:16). The goal in bringing others along is not to build a coalition who can justify our position, but to provide objectivity to help both parties involved work toward a God-honoring solution.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. For those who tend to avoid conflict, this part of the reconciliation process can be the most difficult. What holds you back from telling another person how you've been hurt by them?
2. What are the ways you prefer to be approached with a difficult matter? (Think about both verbal and non-verbal.)
3. How could you initiate a conversation with someone who has hurt or offended you? Brainstorm some opening lines.
4. What are some ways to affirm your concern and respect for the other person?
5. What steps would you take in "widening the circle" if the first conversation does not go well? Who should be your "one or two others"?

CHAPTER 6

BE PREPARED FOR UNREASONABLE PEOPLE

IF HE REFUSES TO LISTEN TO THEM, TELL IT TO THE CHURCH. AND IF HE REFUSES TO LISTEN EVEN TO THE CHURCH, LET HIM BE TO YOU AS A GENTILE AND A TAX COLLECTOR. – MATTHEW 18:17

Unfortunately, after attempts to be reconciled with our brother through multiple conversations (both one-on-one and with others), there are times when we are unable to resolve the issue. At this point, the solution is to expand the circle of accountability and wisdom to include a wider community within the body of Christ. More than likely this would include their community group and perhaps a few others.

It is imperative that the process not stop short of any Scriptural admonition to diligently preserve the unity that the Lord intends (Ephesians 4:3). Where conflict persists, the offender's community should be brought in so that they may directly and authoritatively speak into the matter. Where necessary, the community group might need to separate itself from the obstinate person (Matthew 18:17a; 1 Corinthians 5:1-2), until he is willing to deal with the sin at the heart of the conflict.

While it's certainly frustrating to not get the results we desired, we can still rest well knowing that our approval does not come from men, but God (Galatians 1:10). We should remember that God does not measure success in terms of results, but in terms of faithful obedience. All God expects of us is to obey His revealed will as faithfully as possible (Romans 12:18).

Additionally, we must resolve not to give up on finding a biblical solution. In the meantime, we should:

- Control our tongue (Romans 12:14; Ephesians 4:29).
- Seek godly advisors and not isolate ourselves (Proverbs 15:22, 18:1).
- Keep doing what is right (Romans 12:17; 1 Peter 2:12, 15; 3:15b-16).
- Recognize our limits, fulfilling our role and trusting God with His (Romans 12:18-20).
- Use the ultimate weapon of deliberate, focused love (Romans 12:21; John 3:16; Luke 6:27-31).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How are you tempted to respond in your flesh to an unreasonable person?
2. Describe a tough conversation with a person who seemed unreasonable. How were the principles outlined above and in previous chapters followed; and if not, how might you follow them if you could do it again?
3. Who is "the church" that Jesus refers to in Matthew 18:17?
4. What do you think Paul means when he says, "if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12:18)?
5. How can we separate from someone, but still love them in a deliberate, focused way?

