



PC · COMPLEX HUMAN REALITIES

Conflict Resolution

INTRODUCTION

We are created for connection with the people in our world. In our interactions with others, we inevitably encounter conflict. In the book *Resolving Everyday Conflict*, Sande and Johnson state, “conflict happens when you are at odds with another person over what you think, want, or do.” God calls us to be peacemakers, to work through conflict and move towards reconciliation in our relationships. As ministers we also are called to assist others on the road from conflict towards reconciliation and peace. In this course, we will be looking at how we respond to conflict and what peacemaking tools we can use to resolve conflict and move towards peace with our neighbor.

RESPONSES TO CONFLICT

The three main categories of responses to conflict are:

1. **Escape,**
2. **Attack** or
3. **Make peace.**

1. **Escape (Peacefaking)** The two forms of escape that we typically see are:

- **Flight (running away):** One uses this response in attempts to avoid the conflict. Flight may be temporarily appropriate as a person gains control of their emotions and prayerfully considers the situation. Flight is also a valid defense in the case of serious threats as it allows all reasonable efforts to be taken to secure trustworthy and needed assistance in coming to a long-term solution.
- **Denial:** One uses this response when refusing to admit that a conflict exists.

Consider: The end result of both escape responses is that the work that is needed to resolve the conflict remains undone.

2. **Attack (Peacebreaking)**

When a person is choosing attack responses, their goal is to prevail over the other individual or group.

There's a wide range of tactics that fall into this category:

- **Verbal intimidation:** One may use insults and cruel words to scare and/or manipulate another. Sometimes these insults are masked in humor or sarcasm.
- **Litigation:** This also falls under attack responses and includes not only actual court cases but also ways in which people state and plead their cases to family, friends, other acquaintances, or even just in their own minds, in the absence of going to court.
- **Physical assaults:** Pastoral Care Note: Physical assault is never acceptable.

As a minister involved in providing pastoral care to souls, it is important to remain alert to situations of potential danger. True conflict resolution necessitates that individuals are not in harm's way.

3. Make Peace

When a person is aiming to make peace, then they are on the road to a healed and restored relationship. On this path, the pursuit of genuine peace and care for the people involved are more important than running or winning. We are going to learn about the steps we can take towards true harmony and peace.

QUESTIONS FOR INTROSPECTION AND DISCUSSION:

1. Am I mindful of my role as a peacemaker? Explain.

2. Which response do you see yourself using most regularly?

Consider: Does this change depending on who you are in conflict with? For example: close family member versus work colleague versus acquaintance? Why or why not?

3. When assisting others in making peace, what is more challenging for you, someone who is in escape mode or attack mode? Why?

THE FOUR G's OF PEACEMAKING

G1: Go Higher (*Glorify God*) · **G2: Get Real** (*Get the Log Out of Your Own Eye*)
G3: Gently Engage (*Gently Restore*) · **G4: Get Together** (*Go and Be Reconciled*)

THE 4 GS OF PEACEMAKING

G1: Go Higher (*Glorify God*)

When in conflict, people frequently make the mistake of leaving God out of the situation and depending only on their own resources. Many times, it is helpful for the person(s) involved to STOP, before relational damage is done, and look up.

Here are some questions to consider as we look higher:

- “What is God doing in this situation?”
- “What answers does He have for this conflict?”
- “How can I please and honor God in this situation?”

When we say that we want to “glorify God”, we want to display and bring awareness to His greatness in our lives.

Below are three steps that you can take to **glorify God**:

- **Trust God:** We can ask God to give us the grace needed to rely on Him, remember His promises, and follow His ways even when they don’t align with what we feel like doing (Proverbs 3:5-7). Trust provides us with the ability to continue on God’s path, knowing that our God will continue to guide us and keep us in His loving care.
- **Obey God:** We can show our deep love for God by obeying His commands. We can rely on God’s help to do what we know and we can dig into our bibles or ask for guidance from a mature Christian if we are having difficulty determining what God’s will is for us in a particular situation.
- **Imitate God:** Imitating Jesus and following His example of mercy, forgiveness, humility, and love is the surest way of restoring peace to a relationship in conflict.

In focusing on the above steps, we are able to control our emotions and avoid doing and saying things that we might later regret. Our lives can be a testimony of God’s glory and we can be at peace, knowing that our obedience is pleasing to God.

Overlooking an Offense: It is important to note that some hurts, such as minor offenses, can simply be overlooked. God has been patient and merciful with us and we all have opportunities to extend mercy to another. This is an approach that glorifies God. It is fueled by the power of the gospel and enables an ambience of grace.

This approach shouldn’t be confused with the “escape or peacefaking” response above. When we overlook an offense, we let it go, completely forgive, and refuse to dwell or act on it further.

Overlooking is an initial option available to us, but there are times when it is not the best choice.

Other steps are likely appropriate when an offense:

- Is hurting your relationships;
- Is injuring others;
- Is hurting the wrongdoer;
- Is dishonoring God in a significant way.

It is not always easy to determine when an offense should or shouldn't be overlooked and it's important to continue to ask for God's help and wisdom in these matters.

QUESTIONS FOR INTROSPECTION AND DISCUSSION:

1. Think of a time where you personally sought to glorify God in a conflict. What impact did that have in the situation?

2. What kind of challenges can you foresee when trusting, obeying, and imitating God is one-sided? Who can we count on for help in these situations?

3. When looking at the costs of carrying an offense, how can overlooking an offense be beneficial?

G2: Get Real (*Get the Log Out of Your Own Eye*)

When we are in a conflict, our attention naturally falls on the other party's faults. To step towards peace, instead of downplaying our own faults, we need to first ask ourselves: "How can I own **my part** of this conflict?"

The foundation for this step comes from Jesus's teaching:

"And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (Matthew 7:3-5)

Jesus does not prohibit the correction of another's faults, but He uses this exaggerated example to show where we should focus our energy initially. We need to deal with our part of the issue first so that we can see the problem clearly. Once we have looked into our own sin, which is our responsibility, then we can make the corrections needed.

When looking at our flaws and shortcomings, they tend to fall into two categories:

- We might be overly sensitive and easily offended: When we have been badly hurt in the past, it can affect how we react in the present. When treated in a less-than-ideal manner, we may have a tendency to respond quickly instead of taking time to work through the issue and grant the offender the grace that we would hope to receive.
- Our own sinful behavior may have contributed to the conflict: A few of us might easily see how our actions or lack of action promoted the dispute, but for many of us, it is difficult to see our own faults and mistakes clearly. Prayerfully asking God to search our hearts (Psalm 139:23-24), studying the Bible (Hebrews 4:12), and seeking spiritually mature counsel (Proverbs 19:20) are some ways that we can uncover shortcomings and failings that we may be blind to.

After we have acknowledged our wrongdoing to ourselves, we must confess this to the person(s) that we have offended in order to take full responsibility for our fault. Below are some important points to consider when crafting an effective confession.

The Seven A's of Good Confession

1. **Address everyone involved:** Once we have realized we have sinned, we want to confess to:
 - God - This is the first confession that we need to make with any sin.
 - The person that we sinned against - provided that the sin was affecting another person(s). (When we sin only in our thoughts and others are not affected, we confess only to God.)
 - Any observers to the transgression - if applicable.
2. **Avoid If, But and Maybe**—and phrases like “it wasn’t my intention to ...”: When we use words like these in trying to excuse or justify our wrong, our confession loses its intended purpose of expressing genuine repentance.
3. **Admit Specifically:** Simply saying generic statements such as “I’m sorry” or “I’m sorry you got so upset” can leave the one receiving the apology wondering if we are truly repentant and if we truly understand the sin and its implications.
4. **Acknowledge the Hurt:** We want to acknowledge the hurt that we induced, and we want the person we hurt to feel understood. It’s ok to ask if you have correctly understood how the person is feeling.
5. **Accept the Consequences:** We want to fully accept that God has forgiven us, but it is important for us to also accept responsibility for the consequences for what was done and to try to repair the situation as part of the process of repentance.
6. **Alter Your Behavior:** As part of the confession, we can include our plans to change. Sharing this information can make it easier for the one who has been wronged to see our genuine repentance and to grant forgiveness.
7. **Ask Forgiveness (and allow time):** When making a confession, we may forget the next step of asking, “Will you please forgive me?” Then we need to allow time. God’s forgiveness is immediate (1 John 1:9) but people may need time to pray, process their feelings, and forgive.

Note: For minor offenses, all of the above steps may not be needed.

QUESTIONS FOR INTROSPECTION AND DISCUSSION:

1. Have you ever tried to justify your actions by using qualifiers such as “but” or “if I offended you” in your confession? If so, were there times when it was not well received? Explain.

2. What is the most challenging point in the “Seven A’s of a Good Confession” for you when making a confession?

3. What are some productive things that we can do as we allow a person the time they may need after a confession?

G3- Gently Engage (Gently Restore)

There are times when we are called to address an individual's wrongdoings and shortcomings. If we are deficient in the areas of spiritual and emotional maturity, we may be over eager to discuss our concern with the one who offended us. Feeling this way may mean that we are not the best person for this task and that our attempts may have limited success.

In reality, most of us are probably reluctant to go to another person with the purpose of discussing their shortcomings. How can we know if the fault of another is too serious to overlook?

Here are some points to consider when we are unsure if it is appropriate for us to go to the offender to discuss an offense:

- "I need to go when a conflict damages my relationship with someone." If we are having a hard time forgiving a serious offense or if a less significant offense is occurring repeatedly to the point where the concern is causing irritation and bitterness to develop, then we should go to discuss the concern.
- "I need to go when a conflict is hurting others." This can mean that the offender caused substantial harm to yourself or others, or it can mean that the example being set is causing harm by provoking others to act correspondingly, leading others into sin.
- "I need to go when a conflict is hurting the offender." An example of this type of harm is alcohol abuse.
- "I need to go when a conflict is significantly dishonoring God." If someone states that they are a Christian but their actions are significantly and negatively impacting the way that nonbelievers may be thinking about God and other Christians, this most likely is an issue that should be discussed.

If someone has something against us, it also is important for us to make the first move to go and discuss it with them, even if we feel that it is not a valid concern.

Once we have made the decision to go to another to discuss the conflict and all that is contributing to it, we should consider the following points:

- "Getting face to face is the best way to go to others." One might be tempted to use an email or a phone call or text but the best way to resolve conflict involves observing body language and facial expressions in a face-to-face discussion.
- "Good listening is particularly important as you go." We don't have all the answers and it's important to show respect as we are "swift to hear" (James 1:19) and give the offender a chance to explain things from their perspective.
- "Before you go, carefully plan what you want to say." It's a good idea to have some notes, an outline, or a basic script as we start the conversation.

- “Engaging others is more than simply confronting them with their wrongs.” Asking God for help is an important step as we utilize discernment in addressing the wrong but also so we don’t come down too hard. We want to keep in mind the goal of preserving the relationship as we teach, correct, and encourage.

Most conflicts can be resolved on a personal level, one on one, using the biblical guidance outlined above. If reconciliation has not been attained with these steps, Jesus gave us an additional step in Matthew 18:16, *“But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’”* At this point we can look for one or more spiritual mature and impartial person(s) to come along with us in order to calm the situation and enhance communication in a Christlike manner.

For more information, see article on *“Pursuing Reconciliation Guided by Matthew 18”*.

Only God can move hearts. There are limits to what we can do. Paul outlines our role: *“And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition.”* (2 Timothy 2:24-25 excerpt)

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It is not our responsibility to transform the other person. We hope and watch for people to respond to the work of God’s grace and love in their lives.

QUESTIONS FOR INTROSPECTION AND DISCUSSION:

1. Review the list of conditions where “we need to go...” Are there any situations in your life today that meet any of these criteria? Prayerfully consider next steps.

G4: Get Together (Go and Be Reconciled)

Offering true forgiveness can be very difficult but it is a critical step in finding a reasonable solution, finding true peace, and allowing the relationship to be reconciled. It's important to understand what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is NOT:

- a feeling (but rather a willful decision)
- forgetting (but rather choosing not to dwell on the offense)
- excusing (but rather honestly acknowledging the sin)

The Two Components of Forgiveness:

1. The heart component of forgiveness is the releasing of the sin to God and promising God that you are committed to having an attitude of forgiveness toward the offender. It does not depend on the other person being repentant.
2. The transactional (relational) component of forgiveness is between the person who has been hurt and the offender. When the offender has confessed and repented, then forgiveness can be extended. This is a willful decision to release the offender from the offense and have a reconciled relationship.

When a person offers true forgiveness to another, they promise that:

- "I won't dwell on this incident."
- "I won't bring up this incident and use it against you."
- "I won't talk to others about this incident."
- "I won't allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship."

When forgiveness is offered, the consequence of a damaged relationship is removed but there may still be other consequences to be dealt with. We can pray for wisdom as we consider if we can offer mercy or if the best course of action for that person is to have the opportunity to learn from the consequences.

Here are some thoughts to consider If we are struggling with offering forgiveness:

- God has offered us radical forgiveness and He continues to want a close relationship with us.
- Now He calls us to do likewise for our neighbor.
- We have the privilege to go to our God in prayer and admit our struggle and ask for His help.
- Our God is an ever-present help to us. He can help us find solutions on the journey to forgiveness and reconciliation.

True forgiveness costs... and that is why it can be difficult to offer. It is important to remember that

Jesus already paid the price on the cross. Only with God's grace and guidance can we have the strength to offer forgiveness.

QUESTIONS FOR INTROSPECTION AND DISCUSSION:

1. Can you think of examples of how God demonstrated both the heart and the transactional types of forgiveness? Consider: Luke 23:34 and Acts 2:36-41

2. What are some of the costs of forgiveness? What has been paid for the forgiveness that we have received from God?

3. What would be an example of a person having the opportunity to learn from consequences?

CONCLUSION

Overcoming Evil with Good

Even if we are doing everything according to the guidance above, sometimes things don't turn out the way that we think they should. People may resist our peacemaking efforts and be antagonistic towards us. What should we do when facing this challenge?

Here's some points to consider:

- Don't give up on doing the right things. Continue to abstain from retaliation. It may be tempting to distance ourselves, strike back, or not show any kindness towards our opponent. God wants us to continue to abstain from attacking or escaping.
- We can continue to pray for our enemies (Luke 6:27-28).
- Refrain from slander and gossip. Speak only things that are both true and kind of your opponent. Romans 12:14 states "Bless those who persecute you".
- Seek support from trusted friends or ministers who can help you to stay on track with biblically sound advice.
- Remember that a person can't be forced to cooperate with our efforts and make peace. God requests that we continue in obedience to Him. The rest we leave in His hands.
- We can continue to love our enemy and to treat others the way that we would want to be treated. Focused and deliberate love is a powerful tool. It is what God used to win our hearts and it can also change the hearts of those who oppose us.

Content based closely on the work of Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson, "Resolving Everyday Conflict".