

Getting to the Heart of Conflict

Wouldn't it be wonderful if people could simply renounce their bad habits and decide to respond to conflict in a gracious and constructive way? But it is not that easy. In order to break free from the pattern they have fallen into, they need to understand why they react to conflict the way they do.

Jesus provides us with clear guidance on this issue. During His earthly ministry, a young man approached the Lord and asked Him to settle an inheritance dispute with his brother. "Jesus replied, 'Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?' Then he said to them, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions'" (Luke 12:13-15).

This passage reveals a common human pattern. When faced with conflict, we tend to focus passionately on what our opponent has done wrong or should do to make things right. In contrast, God always calls us to focus on what is going on in our own hearts when we are at odds with others. Why? Because our heart is the wellspring of all our thoughts, words, and actions, and therefore the source of our conflicts. "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Matthew 15:19).

The heart's central role in conflict is vividly described in James 4:1-3. If you understand this passage, you will have found a key to preventing and resolving conflict.

"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

This passage describes the root cause of destructive conflict: Conflicts arise from unmet desires in our hearts. When we feel we cannot be satisfied unless we have something we want or think we need, the desire turns into a demand. If someone fails to meet that desire, we condemn him in our heart and quarrel and fight to get our way. In short, conflict arises when desires grow into demands and we judge and punish those who get in our way. Let us look at this progression one step at a time.

The Progression of an Idol¹

I Desire

Conflict always begins with some kind of desire. Some desires are inherently wrong, such as vengeance, lust, or greed. But many desires are not wrong in and of themselves. For example, there is nothing innately wrong about desiring things like peace and quiet, a clean home, a new computer, professional success, an intimate relationship with your spouse, or respectful children.

If a good desire, such as wanting an intimate relationship with your spouse, is not being met, it is perfectly legitimate to talk about it with your spouse. As you talk, you may discover ways that both of you can help to fulfill each other in mutually beneficial ways. If not, it may be appropriate to seek help from your pastor or a Christian counselor who can assist you in understanding your differences and strengthening your marriage.

But what if your spouse persistently fails to meet a particular desire and is unwilling to discuss it further with you or anyone else? This is where you stand at a crossroad. On the one hand, you can trust God and seek your fulfillment in Him (Psalm 73:25). You can ask Him to help you to continue to grow and mature no matter what your spouse does (James 1:2-4). And you can continue to love your spouse and pray for God's sanctifying work in his or her life (1 John 4:19-21; Luke 6:27-28). If you follow this course, God promises to bless you and use your difficult situation to conform you to the likeness of Christ (Romans 8:28-29).

On the other hand, you can dwell on your disappointment and allow it to control your life. At the very least, this will result in self-pity and bitterness toward your spouse. At worst, it can destroy your marriage. Let us look at how this downward spiral evolves.

I Demand

Unmet desires have the potential of working themselves deeper and deeper into our hearts. This is especially true when we come to see a desire as something we need or deserve, and therefore must have in order to be happy or fulfilled. There are many ways to justify or legitimize a desire.

- "I work hard all week. Don't I deserve a little peace and quiet when I come home?"
- "I worked two jobs to put you through school; I deserve your respect and appreciation."
- "I spend hours managing the family budget; I really need a new computer."
- "The Bible says we should save up to cover unexpected problems; we need to tighten our budget so we can put more into savings."
- "God has given me a gift for developing new businesses, and He calls me to work hard to support our family. I deserve to have more of your support."
- "Scripture says a husband and wife should be completely united in love. I need to have more intimacy with you."
- "I only want what God commands: children who have learned to respect their parents and use their God-given gifts to the fullest."

There is an element of validity in each of these statements. The trouble is that if our desire is not met, these attitudes can lead to a vicious cycle. The more we want something, the more we think of it as something we need and deserve. And the more we think we are entitled to it, the more convinced we are that we cannot be happy and secure without it.

When we see our object of desire as being essential to our fulfillment and well-being, it moves from being a desire to a demand. "I wish I could have this" evolves into "I must have this!" This is where trouble sets in. Even if the initial desire was not inherently wrong, it has grown so strong that it begins to control our thoughts and behavior. In biblical terms, it has become an "idol."

Most of us think of an idol as a statue of wood, stone, or metal worshiped by pagan people. But the concept is much broader and far more personal than that. An idol is anything apart from God that we depend on to be happy, fulfilled, or secure. In biblical terms it is something other than God that we set our heart on (Luke 12:29), that motivates us (1 Corinthians 4:5), that masters and rules us (Psalm 119:133; Ephesians 5:5), or that we trust, fear, or serve (Isaiah 42:17; Matthew 6:24; Luke 12:4-5). In short, it is something we love and pursue in place of God (see Philippians 3:19).

Given its controlling effect on our lives, an idol can also be referred to as a "false god" or a "functional god." As Martin Luther wrote, "To whatever we look for any good thing and for refuge in every need, that is what is meant by 'god.' To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in him from the heart.... To whatever you give your heart and entrust your being, that, I say, is really your god."²

Even sincere Christians struggle with idolatry. We may believe in God and say we want to serve Him only, but at times we allow other influences to rule us. In this sense we are no different from the ancient Israelites: "Even while these people were worshiping the LORD, they were serving their idols. To this day their children and grandchildren continue to do as their fathers did" (2 Kings 17:41).

It is important to emphasize the fact that idols can arise from good desires as well as wicked desires. It is often not what we want that is the problem, but that we want it too much. For example, it is not unreasonable for a man to want a passionate sexual relationship with his wife, or for a wife to want open and honest communication with her husband, or for either of them to want a steadily growing savings account. These are good desires, but if they turn into demands that must be met in order for either spouse to be satisfied and fulfilled, they result in bitterness, resentment, or self-pity that can destroy a marriage.

How can you discern when a good desire might be turning into a sinful demand? You can begin by prayerfully asking yourself "X-ray" questions that reveal the true condition of your heart.

- What am I preoccupied with? What is the first thing on my mind in the morning and the last thing on my mind at night?
- How would I complete this statement: "If only _____, then I would be happy, fulfilled, and secure"?
- What do I want to preserve or avoid?
- Where do I put my trust?
- What do I fear?
- When a certain desire is not met, do I feel frustration, anxiety, resentment, bitterness, anger, or depression?
- Is there something I desire so much that I am willing to disappoint or hurt others in order to have it?

As you search your heart for idols, you will often encounter multiple layers of concealment, disguise, and justification. As mentioned earlier, one of the most subtle cloaking devices is to argue that we want only what God Himself commands.

For example, a mother may desire that her children be respectful and obedient to her, kind to one another, and diligent in developing their gifts and talents. And she can back up each goal with a specific scripture that shows that God Himself desires such behavior.

When they do not fulfill these goals, even after her repeated encouragement or correction, she may feel frustrated, angry, or resentful. She needs to ask, "Why am I feeling this way? Is it a righteous anger that they are not living up to God's standards? Or is it a selfish anger that they are not giving me the smooth, comfortable, and convenient day I want?"

In most cases, it will be a mixture of both. Part of her truly wants to see her children love and obey God in every way, both for His glory and for their good. But another part of her is motivated by a desire for her own comfort and convenience. Which desire is really controlling her heart and reactions?

If the God-centered desire is dominating the mother's heart, her response to disobedient children should be characterized by God's discipline toward her. "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Psalm 103:8). As she imitates God, her response will line up with corrective guidelines found in Galatians 6:1: "If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." In other words, although her discipline may be direct and firm, it will be wrapped in gentleness and love, and leave no residue of resentment or unforgiveness.

On the other hand, if her desire for comfort and convenience has become an idol, her reaction to her children will be much different. It will be characterized by smoldering anger as well as harsh and unnecessarily hurtful words or discipline. She may feel bitterness or resentment that her desires have been frustrated. And even after disciplining her children, she may maintain a lingering coolness toward them that extends their punishment and warns them not to cross her again. If this latter group of attitudes and actions frequently characterizes her response, it is a sign that her desire for godly children has probably evolved into an idolatrous demand.

I Judge

Another sign of idolatry is the inclination to judge other people. When they fail to satisfy our desires and live up to our expectations, we criticize and condemn in our hearts if not with our words. As Dave Powlison writes:

We judge others—criticize, nit-pick, nag, attack, condemn— because we literally play God. This is heinous. [The Bible says]"There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you to judge your neighbor?" Who are you when you judge? None other than a God wannabe. In this, we become like the Devil himself (no surprise that the Devil is mentioned in James 3:15 and 4:7). We act exactly like the adversary who seeks to usurp God's throne and who acts as the accuser of the brethren. When you and I fight, our minds become filled with accusations: your wrongs and my rights preoccupy me. We play the self-righteous judge in the mini-kingdoms we establish.³

This insight should leave us shaking in our boots! When we judge others and condemn them in our hearts for not meeting our desires, we are imitating the Devil (see James 3:15; 4:7). We have doubled our idolatry problem: Not only have we let an idolatrous desire rule our hearts, but we have also set ourselves up as judging minigods. This is a formula for excruciating conflict.

This is not to say that it is inherently wrong to evaluate or even judge others within certain limits. Scripture teaches that we should observe and evaluate others' behavior so that we can respond and minister to them in appropriate ways, which may even involve loving confrontation (see Matthew 7:1-5; 18:15; Galatians 6:1).

We cross the line, however, when we begin to sinfully judge others, which is characterized by a feeling of superiority, indignation, condemnation, bitterness, or resentment. Sinful judging often involves speculating on others' motives. Most of all, it reveals the absence of a genuine love and concern toward them. When these attitudes are present, our judging has crossed the line and we are playing God.

The closer we are to others, the more we expect of them and the more likely we are to judge them when they fail to meet our expectations. For example, we may look at our spouse and think, "If you really love me, you above all people will help meet this need." We think of our children and say, "After all I've done for you, you owe this to me."

We can place similar expectations on relatives, close friends, or members of our church. Expectations are not inherently bad. It is good to hope for the best in others and reasonable to anticipate receiving understanding and support from those who are closest to us.

But if we are not careful, these expectations can become conditions and standards that we use to judge others. Instead of giving people room for independence, disagreement, or failure, we rigidly impose our expectations on them. In effect, we expect them to give allegiance to our idols. When they refuse to do so, we condemn them in our hearts and with our words, and our conflicts with them take on a heightened intensity.

I Punish

Idols always demand sacrifices. When others fail to satisfy our demands and expectations, our idols demand that they should suffer. Whether deliberately or unconsciously, we will find ways to hurt or punish people so they will give in to our desires.

This punishment can take many forms. Sometimes we react in overt anger, lashing out with hurtful words to inflict pain on those who fail to meet our expectations. When we do so, we are essentially placing others on the altar of our idol and sacrificing them, not with a pagan knife, but with the sharp edge of our tongue. Only when they give in to our desire and give us what we want will we stop inflicting pain upon them.

But we punish those who don't bow to our idols in numerous other ways as well. Our children may use pouting, stomping, or dirty looks to hurt us for not meeting their desires. Adults and children alike may impose guilt or shame on others by walking around with pained or crushed looks on their faces. Some people even resort to physical violence or sexual abuse to punish and control others.

As we grow in faith and awareness of our sin, most of us recognize and reject overt and obviously sinful means of punishing others. But our idols do not give up their influence easily, and they often lead us to develop more subtle means of punishing those who do not serve them.

Withdrawal from a relationship is a common way to hurt others. This may include a subtle coolness toward the other person, withholding affection or physical contact, being sad or gloomy, refusing to look someone in the eye, or even abandoning the relationship altogether.

Sending subtle, unpleasant cues over a long period of time is an age-old method of inflicting punishment. For example, a friend of mine mentioned to me that his wife was not pleased with the fact that he was giving so much time to a particular ministry. He closed by saying, "And as we all know, when momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy!" He laughed as he said it, but his comment made me think of the proverb, "A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day" (Proverbs 27:15). A woman has a unique ability to set the tone in a home. If she is not careful, she can pervert that gift and use it to create an unpleasant or uncomfortable atmosphere that tells her family, "Either get in line with what I want, or you will suffer." Such behavior is an act of unbelief: Instead of relying on God's means of grace to sanctify her family, she depends on her own tools of punishment to manipulate them into change. Of course, a man can do the same thing; by being perpetually critical and unhappy, he too can make everyone in the family miserable until they give in to his idols. The usual result of such behavior is a superficial, splintered family.

Inflicting pain on others is one of the surest signs that an idol is ruling our hearts (see James 4:1-3). When we catch ourselves punishing others in any way, whether deliberately and overtly or unconsciously and subtly, it is a warning that something other than God is ruling our hearts.

The Cure for an Idolatrous Heart

An idol, as we have seen, is any desire that has grown into a consuming demand that rules our heart; it is something we think we must have to be happy, fulfilled, or secure. To put it another way, it is something we love, fear, or trust.

Love, fear, trust—these are words of worship! Jesus commands us to love God, fear God, and trust God and God alone (Matthew 22:37; Luke 12:4-5; John 14:1). Any time we long for something apart from God, fear something more than God, or trust in something other than God to make us happy, fulfilled, or secure, we are engaging in the worship of false gods. As a result, we deserve the judgment and wrath of the true God.

Deliverance from Judgment

There is only one way out of this bondage and judgment: It is to look to God Himself, who loves to deliver people from their idols. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2-3).

The Progression of an Idol

...Desire
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...Punish

God has provided the cure for our idolatry by sending His Son to experience the punishment that we deserve because of our sin. Through Jesus Christ we can become righteous in God's sight and find freedom from sin and idolatry. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:1-2).

To receive this forgiveness and freedom, we must acknowledge our sin, repent of it, and put our trust in Jesus Christ (see Acts 3:19; Psalm 32:5). When we do, we are no longer under God's judgment. Instead, He brings us into His family, makes us His children and heirs, and enables us to live a godly life (Galatians 4:4-7). This is the good news of the gospel—forgiveness and eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Deliverance from Specific Idols

Yet there is more good news. God wants to deliver us not only from our general problem with sin and idolatry, but also from the specific, day-to-day idols that consume us, control us, and cause conflict with those around us.

This deliverance is not done in blanket fashion, with all our idols being swept away in one great spiritual experience. Instead, God calls us to identify and confess our idols one by one, and then to cooperate with Him as He steadily removes them bit by bit from our hearts.

God conveys His grace to help us in this identification and deliverance process via three vehicles: His Bible, His Spirit, and His church. The Bible is "living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). As you diligently study and meditate on the Bible and sit under regular, sound preaching, God will use His Word like a spotlight and a scalpel in your heart. It will reveal your idolatrous desires and show you how to love and worship God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.

The Holy Spirit aids our deliverance from idols by helping us to understand the Bible, to identify our sin, and to pursue a godly life (1 Corinthians 2:10-15; Philippians 2:13). Therefore, we should pray on a daily basis for the Spirit to guide, convict, and strengthen us in our walk with Christ.

Finally, God has surrounded us with brothers and sisters in Christ who can teach us, lovingly confront us about our idols, and provide encouragement and guidance in our spiritual growth (Galatians 6:1; Romans 15:14). This requires that we commit ourselves to consistent involvement in a solid, biblical church and seek regular fellowship and accountability from spiritually mature believers.

Through these three vehicles of grace, God will help you examine your life and progressively expose and deliver you from the idols that rule your heart. This process involves several key steps.

- Prayerfully ask yourself the "X-ray" questions listed previously, which will help you discern the desires that have come to rule your heart.
- Keep track of your discoveries in a journal so that you can identify patterns and steadily go after specific idols.
- Pray daily that God would rob your idols of their influence in your life by making you miserable whenever you give in to them.
- Describe your idols to your spouse and an accountability partner, and ask them to pray for you and lovingly confront you when they see signs that the idol is still controlling you.
- Realize that idols are masters of change and disguise. As soon as you gain a victory over a particular sinful desire, your idol is likely to reappear in a related form, with a redirected desire and more subtle means of attracting your attention.
- If you are dealing with an idol that is difficult to identify or conquer, go to your pastor or some other spiritually mature advisor, and seek his or her counsel and support.
- Most of all, ask God to replace your idols with a growing love for Him and a consuming desire to worship Him and Him alone (more on this below).

If someone told you that you had a deadly cancer that would take your life if you did not get treatment, you would probably spare no effort or expense in pursuing the most rigorous treatment available. Well, you do have cancer, a cancer of the soul. It is called sin and idolatry. But there is a cure. It is called the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is administered through the Word, the Spirit, and the church. The more rigorously you avail yourself of these means of grace, the greater effect they will have in delivering you from the idols that plague your soul.

Replace Idol Worship with Worship of the True God

In his excellent book *Future Grace*, John Piper teaches that "sin is what you do when you are not fully satisfied in God."⁴ The same may be said about idolatry: It is what we do when we are not fully satisfied in God. In other words, if we are not fulfilled and secure in God, we will inevitably seek other sources of happiness and security.

Therefore, if you want to squeeze the idols out of your heart and leave no room for them to return, make it your top priority to aggressively pursue an all-consuming worship for the living God. Ask Him to teach you how to love, fear, and trust Him more than anything in this world. Replacing idol worship with worship of the true God involves several steps:

- **Repent before God.** When we repent and confess our sins and idols, believing in our forgiveness through Christ, we also confess our faith in Christ. Repentance and confession of our faith in the true God is true worship (1 John 1:8-10). "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17; see also Isaiah 66:2b).
- **Fear God.** Stand in awe of the true God when you are tempted to fear others or are afraid of losing something precious. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of [all wisdom]" (Proverbs 1:7). "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared" (Psalm 130:3-4).
- **Love God.** Desire the One who forgives us and provides everything we need instead of looking to other things that cannot save you. "Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind' " (Matthew 22:37). "Those who seek the LORD lack no good thing" (Psalm 34:10). "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psalm 73:25-26).
- **Trust God.** Rely on the One who sacrificed His Son for you and has proven Himself to be absolutely dependable in every situation. "It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man" (Psalm 118:8). "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5). "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Peter 1:3-4).
- **Delight in God.** Find your greatest joy in thinking about God, meditating on His works, talking to others about Him, praising Him, and giving Him thanks. "Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4). "My mouth is filled with your praise, declaring your splendor all day long" (Psalm 71:8). "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

As these passages indicate, God has designed a wonderful cycle for those who want to worship Him above all things. As you love, praise, give thanks, and delight yourself in God, He will fulfill your desires with the best thing in the world: more of Himself! And as you learn to delight more and more in Him, you will feel less need to find happiness, fulfillment, and security in the things of this world. By God's grace, the influence of idolatry and conflict in your family can be steadily diminished, and you and your family can enjoy the intimacy and security that come from worshiping the one true God.

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Endnotes

¹ I owe Paul Tripp, David Powlison, and Ed Welch of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (www.CCEF.org) a great debt for the many insights they have given to me on this topic through their books and seminars.

² F. Samuel Janzow, *Luther's Large Catechism: A Contemporary Translation with Study Questions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), p. 13.

³ *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 16, no. 1, fall 1997.

⁴ John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters, Ore: Multnomah), page 9.