
Resolving Conflict Christ's Way

by Robert D. Jones

Conflict is one of the most painful aspects of our fallen world. Perhaps no sort of problem troubles us more. When sinners like you and I rub shoulders with other sinners, we encounter conflict. Whether at home, in our workplace, or even at church, disputes frequently arise. Unresolved conflicts come in many shapes and sizes: Husband-wife, parent-child, brother-sister, supervisor-employee, or church member-member. They mark, and mar, many of our relationships.

However, the Bible has plenty to offer for resolving conflicts. Let's consider three general principles, along with some practical lessons under each. These truths promise not only to transform the way you handle your conflicts, but also to help you to help others resolve theirs.

Principle 1: God Calls You to Pursue Peace in All Your Relationships

No text expresses this call better than Romans 12:18, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." The apostle Paul urges you to pursue peace with everyone and resolve every conflict.

The context of this call is crucial to see. Romans 12 opens by reminding us of God's saving mercy in Jesus Christ ("Therefore, I

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urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy," v. 1), the saving mercy expounded in Romans 1-11. In Romans 12, the apostle tells us what we should be and do as a result of what God has done to save us.

The order here is critical. We love and obey God because He first loved us. We pursue peace with others because God first reconciled us to Himself. Just as God, through the cross, made vertical peace between Himself and us, so He calls his sons and daughters to make horizontal peace with others. God's "verse 1 mercy" propels our "verse 18 peacemaking." The gospel drives our efforts.

What does Romans 12:18 teach about resolving conflicts? *First, you are responsible to live at peace with others.* The command is clear; the responsibility is yours. Jesus imposes the same duty in His teaching, and He commands you to take the initiative in reconciling relationships. Whether you are the offending party (Matt. 5:23-26) or the offended party (Matt. 18:15-17; Luke 17:3-4), Christ calls you to go to the other person, to interface with him. The fact that these texts also call the other person to go to you must not excuse your delay ("he started it, let him come to me"). You are not responsible for his actions; you are responsible for yours—"as far as it depends on you." Let nothing derail your pursuit of peace.

Second, remember that God does not guarantee the outcome. Here the Bible is utterly real-

istic: "If it is possible" means that it might not be possible, despite your best efforts. By prefacing his command with "As far as it depends on you," Paul concedes, as the saying goes, that "it takes two to tango." Since God does not promise you reconciliation in every situation, don't live for it. As I frequently remind those I counsel, "Never put your hope in what God has not guaranteed!"

How comforting this truth can be when your sincere reconciliation efforts have failed! It is entirely pos-

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sible that you will do everything God wants you to do, and still have remaining conflicts. I've seen many sinned-against spouses make great efforts to reconcile with their mates, but to no avail. But rest assured; God is pleased. Even if the other person does not reciprocate, the Lord promises you His blessing and comfort. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9).

At the same time, this truth, that our peacemaking efforts might fail, tests our faith and exposes our hearts. We must learn to let go of our subtle demand—our idolatrous desire—that all our relationships be fixed. Even God's perfectly obedient Son did not experience that; neither will you. Here your thinking must be precise. You must repent, not for wanting reconciliation, but for *demanding* it. Instead, you must entrust to your sovereign, loving God both the other person and the outcome of the conflict situation. To learn contentment amid unreconciled relationships becomes part of the Vinedresser's agenda for you.

Third, you must seek to reconcile with everyone with whom you have conflict. The Romans 12:18 exhortation is comprehensive: You must seek to live at peace "with everyone." God does not allow you the luxury of ignoring even one relationship. You cannot exclude anyone from your peacemaking agenda.

This challenges me as a husband and parent. I must not overlook family tensions. If one of my children has something against me, I cannot write it off with a simple, "he'll get over it, he'll grow up." This challenges me as a church member and pastor. If I hear that I may have offended someone, God does not allow me to avoid the matter or to let the person slip away without contact.

Given these truths, it is no wonder that biblical conflict resolution requires the help of the Holy Spirit. You and I need God's gracious wisdom and power. The same Jesus Christ who died and rose to save His believing people from their sins calls believers in Him to seek peace in all their relationships. Remember Romans 12:18, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

Principle 2: God Teaches You How to View Conflicts

Once you are committed to pursuing peace, you must adopt three crucial perspectives in order to resolve conflicts in Christlike ways. Since the way you view something will direct the way you deal with it, before you deal with conflicts biblically you must view them biblically.

First, realize that conflicts are sinful; therefore, resolve them! Conflicts displease God. They arise from self-centered hearts. They involve hurtful words and actions. They alienate and separate people. They violate biblical teaching about love, unity, harmony, anger, bitterness, and so on. They produce distance, disunity, and disharmony.

In light of this, God calls you to resolve conflicts actively, diligently, and quickly. Conflict resolution requires hard work. You must "pursue" peace (2 Tim. 2:22; Rom. 14:19); that is, you must go after it, track it down, hunt for it. Peacemaking is not optional. "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).

Second, realize that conflicts are inevitable; therefore, expect them! Why? Because we are fallen sinners living with other fallen sinners in a fallen world. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus and His apostles assume that sinners (as we are) will have fights with each other.

Reader, if you are honest, you will admit that this is true in every area of your life. You have had, and will have, conflict in your marriage, family life, work world and local church. No relationship or sphere of life under God's sun is conflict-free.

For example, hear J. C. Ryle's first two rules for a happy marriage: "The first is to marry only in the Lord....The second is not to expect too much from their partners, and to remember that marriage is, after all, the union of two sinners, and not of two angels..."¹

Elisabeth Elliot makes the same point: "When sinful people live in the same world, and especially when they work in the same office or sleep in the same bed, they sin against each other. Troubles arise. Some of those troubles are very serious and not subject to easy

¹J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospel of Mark* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1985, first publication 1857), p. 200.

solutions." The good news? She continues, "God knows all about them, and knew about them long before they happened. He made provision for them."²

This perspective can comfort you the next time a conflict tempts you to give up a relationship. Can you imagine Adam and Eve, upon their fall into sin, questioning whether they should have ever married: "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea; maybe we made a mistake." No! Their marriage, more than any marriage since, was truly "a marriage made in heaven." It was hand-fashioned by God Himself. Yet, turn just one

Peacemaking is not optional.

page from this Genesis 2 perfect marriage to Genesis 3, and we see them in conflict with God and with each other. In fact, the whole Bible from Genesis 3 through Revelation 22 describes our human disharmony and the Redeemer's plan of reconciliation that leads to a glorious restoration of our relationship with God and our fellow Christians.

Jay Adams applies the same truth to dealing with our sinful children:

Parents certainly can take a lot of the unnecessary grief out of child-raising when, as a matter of course (rather than becoming falsely shocked over the fact), they expect their children to do wrong things at home, at school, and in public. There is then no necessity to subject children to unusual and inappropriate discipline or to the excessive anger that sometimes grows out of embarrassment. Once parents are prepared to admit that the biblical doctrine of original sin is true not only in theory, but is operative as well in the life of little Mary or Johnny, they can relax and deal with the problem appropriately (biblically).³

Third, realize that conflicts are opportunities; therefore, seize them! God sovereignly allows conflicts to make us like Jesus. They are part of the "all things" spoken of in Romans 8:28 that God is working together for your good. Of course, verse 29 defines the "good" as Christ-likeness, not circumstantial improvement or repaired relationships. In a conflict situation you have unique, special opportunities to know and trust God, and

²Elisabeth Elliot, *Trusting God in a Twisted World* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1989), p. 96.

³Jay E. Adams, *Christian Living in the Home* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1972), p. 12.

become more like Jesus. As Wayne Mack has observed, "Whenever conflict occurs, you can assume that one or both people need to come into a more vital relationship with Christ."⁴

In addition, conflicts provide the opportunity to love and serve others. Jesus calls you to love your enemies in passages like Luke 6:27-36. Yet, the conflict may not always be with an "enemy." The other party may be a parent, spouse, pastor, or co-worker. In cases like this—not uncommon in my own home—the Lord calls us to learn how to love and serve the other person. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

How should you look at today's conflicts? They are sinful; therefore, resolve them! They are inevitable; therefore, expect them! And they are opportunities; therefore, seize them!

Principle 3: God Directs You How to Resolve Conflicts

Having seen your responsibility to resolve conflicts and having gained a proper view of them, now consider the three biblical steps you must take to resolve them.

First, commit yourself to pleasing God in the conflict situation. Make sure that your all-consuming goal is to please God, not yourself or even the other person (in an appeasing way). "So we make it our goal to please him" (2 Cor. 5:9). In response to Christ's compelling love, believers "should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor. 5:14,15).

What does it mean to please God? Simply put, it means seeking to bring Him delight by being and doing what He desires. It requires obeying His Word (1 Thess. 4:1, 2), by depending on His power (Heb. 13:20,21). It involves both your heart and your behavior (Ps. 19:14). It follows the path of Jesus, who sought never to please Himself, but His Heavenly Father (John 5:30, 8:29; Rom. 15:3).

Adopting this goal of pleasing God amid conflict carries many powerful implications. For one, it will pace your reconciliation efforts in terms of timing, energy, risk, etc. If you tend to act rashly or blow up angrily, then a commitment to please God will harness you. If, however, you tend to withdraw, procrastinate, or avoid conflict, then this commitment will push you.

Using Jean Fleming's theatrical illustration, Jesus

⁴Wayne Mack, from lecture series, "Conflict Resolution in Marriage," given at 14th Annual NANC Conference, 1989. Available on audio tape from Sound Word Associates.

must be both your director and your audience.⁵ As your director, He alone can dictate your behavior and call the shots. But that's not enough. He must also be your audience—the only One you seek to please; the One whose acceptance you most cherish; the One whose “well done, good and faithful servant” affirmation satisfies; and the only One whose smile or frown ultimately matters.

Even if your offenses may be objectively less serious than those of your opponent, Jesus calls you to look upon yours as more serious.

Second, repent and seek forgiveness from God and the other person for your contribution to the conflict. This begins with repenting to God of the sinful, ruling desires that caused the conflict. “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?” (James 4:1). Conflicts come from the heart. They arise because I want something (even a legitimate, good item) so badly that I sin to get it. These inordinate desires and heart idols fuel every fight and quarrel we have. I know this is true in my home; the same is also true in yours. “Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God” (Joel 2:12,13).

Jack and Jill’s explosive fight illustrates this. Jack comes home and yells at Jill for not keeping the house clean or disciplining the kids better: “All I want is to come home to a peaceful house. Is that too much to ask?” Jill yells back, then withdraws with bitter mutterings under her breath about Jack being critical and unsupportive of her: “If only I had a husband who accepts me as I am. I need him to love me unconditionally, not attack me all the time!”

Do you hear the demanding hearts behind their sinful speech? They yell at each other simply because they are not getting what they want. Jack craves comfort and tranquility—a peaceful home. Jill craves acceptance and affirmation—unconditional love. While in one sense neither of these is a bad desire, they have become inordinate and controlling. Jack and Jill must repent of the way that getting peace and being loved have captured their hearts. They must instead live for the Lord and serve each other.

⁵Jean Fleming, *Between Walden and the Whirlwind* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1985), p. 24.

Since those ungodly root desires inevitably produce ungodly fruit behavior, you must also confess your sinful words and actions to God and to the person you have offended. Our Lord Jesus put it this way, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?...You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matt. 7:3-5).

The order here is crucial. You must begin with your planks; that is, your sinful words and actions that contributed to the conflict. Even if your offenses may be objectively less serious than those of your opponent, Jesus calls you to look upon yours as more serious. Yours are planks; his are specks.

This issue of perspective, or relative weight, is critical to understanding and applying Jesus’ words. Suppose in the course of conversation I speak unkindly to Harry and he responds by hitting me in the head with a chair, knocking me unconscious. Witnesses phone 911 for help. The police haul Harry to jail while the paramedics haul me to the hospital.

What do I report to my friends who visit me in the hospital? My natural tendency is to tell everyone how sinfully Harry treated me. With a bandaged mouth I might mutter some expletives about this man. I might be quick to report his actions, while omitting admission of my own sinful speech that provoked him. Objectively, of course, one could argue that his sin was worse than mine—criminally so, in fact.

But for me to draw that conclusion would miss the point of Jesus’ words. From my perspective, I must look at my sin as serious—a plank—and Harry’s as minor—a speck. Instead of dwelling on Harry’s sin, I must dwell on my own: “I can’t believe I spoke that way to Harry. How wicked of me. I was wrong to pierce Harry with my reckless words” (as in Proverbs 12:18). “I have taken the tongue God gave me for praising Him and have used it to curse others instead” (as spoken of in James 3:9-12). I must recognize that God wants me to go to Harry and seek his forgiveness for my ungodly speech. After that, if he remains unrepentant, I can broach the subject of his violent behavior.

Consider this penetrating question to help you expose the dynamic. Whose sin bothers you the most—yours or the other person’s? God has used this question on more than one occasion to bring me to my senses and to regain His perspective. Your answer will indicate how well you grasp Jesus’ log vs. speck rebuke.

Once you see your sinful offenses, how do you make them right? First, go directly to God through Christ in prayer. Confess your sin and receive His full and free forgiveness through Christ’s blood (1 John 1:9;

Ps. 32:1-2). Don't proceed until you reconcile with the Lord.

Then humbly go to the other person to confess your sin and to ask his forgiveness (Matt. 5:23,24). In this you also follow Paul's model, "So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man" (Acts 24:16). Humbling yourself will please God, so discharge your conscience and open a door to reconciliation.

Third, seek to love the other person in the way that God wants. Having dealt with your own heart idols and behavioral planks, you must love and serve the other person. This begins with cultivating Christlike attitudes (Eph. 4:1-3), including graciously forgiving the person, "just as in Christ God forgave you" (4:32). It involves that attitudinal forgiveness of releasing bitterness from the heart and refusing to usurp God's role as judge. Yet, loving your adversary may mean rebuking him (Luke 17:3,4; Matt. 7:5, 18:15; Prov. 27:5,6). Then, if he is repentant, love involves that transacted forgiveness of promising never to bring up that person's sin again. Love "keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Cor. 13:5).

Further, love means learning to listen and speak to him in godly ways (Prov. 12:18, 18:13), and to serve him in concrete, Christlike ways (Luke 6:27-28; Rom. 12:17-21). Again, Jesus declares in Mark 10:45, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." This Mark 10:45 ministry principle can expose the selfish roots of our conflicts and direct our paths toward concrete solutions.

Conclusion

Dear friend, study these three steps and the passages above. Memorize the key words: Please God, Repent, and Love! While the steps are not easy, they are Christ's way to resolve conflicts. By His grace, they are achievable.

*Whose sin bothers you the most—yours
or the other person's?*

Do you need further help? Talk today to your pastors or elders, or a biblical counselor, to receive practical biblical help in resolving the conflicts you are having. Consider reading Ken Sande's masterful book, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Baker, 1997).⁶

In response to God's saving grace, in light of His Word, and in the power of His Spirit, may God help you today to do what He wants you to do to reconcile your relationships and live at peace with everyone.

⁶Sande's book is a biblically-based, practical, systematic manual to help you and others respond to conflicts in godly ways. Chapter 6 includes the Seven A's of confession, a useful memory aid. In addition to Sande's book, consider the many other helpful conciliation resources produced by Peacemaker Ministries (www.HisPeace.org, 406-256-1583, 1537 Avenue D, Ste. 352, Billings, MT 59102).