

## Training Session 21 - Practical Necessities: Preparing to Handle Conflict

### Objective

Prepare your heart and develop a Biblical process for handling conflict.

### Key Scriptures

Galatians 6:1; Matthew 7:3-5; Proverbs 19:11

### Introduction:

“I hate conflict.” I hear this all the time, as if there are some people out there who love it. If you are one of the rare birds who love conflict, then get some help. Seriously. See a therapist. Yet, as much as most of us dislike it, conflict is as inevitable as the sun rising in the morning. Why? Because anytime you have two humans, you have two sinners. Give two humans long enough together, and conflict will arise. Period. The question is not if, but when, and how. When conflict arises, *how* will you deal with it? That’s the key question. Therefore, learning to handle conflict is an extremely practical necessity for you as you follow Jesus.

Strangely, Christians think that somehow they should be immune from conflict, as if sin were no longer a problem for them. Wrong expectations like this make it all the more painful when conflict happens in your church or between Christians. Combine wrong expectations with a lack of understanding of how to follow Christ’s process for resolving conflict, and you get a world filled with church hurt and broken relationships.

The church hurt and broken relationships result from, more often than not, following the secular model of conflict resolution. Most of us simply repeat what we saw in our parents or peers. Even though it didn’t work for them, we run headlong down one of two well-worn, worldly paths, (insanely) expecting different results. These well-worn paths are characterized by fight or flight. **Fighting**, when it comes to conflict, looks like arguing, cussing, physically attacking, getting even, lawyering up, twittering up, facebooking up, gossiping, and just letting them have it. **Flighting**, when it comes to conflict, looks like a string of broken relationships and unaddressed conflict; it looks like leaving church after church, job after job, and relationship after relationship and never dealing with the underlying issues; it looks like denying real problems rather than dealing with them; it looks like triangulation (meaning going to everyone but the person you are in conflict with); it looks like a person who repeatedly gets walked on. And what is the glue that binds both fighting and flighting together? Bitter gossip. Either path ends up in the same place, with bitterness in the heart, gossip on the tongue, and division in the ranks. And Satan smiles!

Jesus gives us another path: Christ-centered conflict resolution. Christ-centered conflict resolution is a third way; it’s the way of gentle love which offers the joy of reconciliation and the hope of restoration. Yes, it’s hard, which is why so few choose it, but think about what hangs in the balance. We’ll either see division, dissension, a trail of broken relationships, bitterness, and Satan winning....or healed relationships, God making a way where there is none, unity, faith, hope, love, and Jesus getting a whole lot of glory. So let’s press in and explore how to walk

through the Biblical process of Christ-centered conflict resolution. We're going to explore five key questions to ask yourself when conflict strikes:

### **1. What is the point of the conflict?**

The point of any and every conflict is always the same: the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). God gets glory when we refuse to follow the way of the world and trust him to make a way where there is no way. Resentment fades and hope emerges as we begin to reframe our present conflict as an opportunity for God to be glorified in our lives.

Jesus says in John 13:35, "By *this* everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you **love** one another." By this. By love. Love is the way the watching world knows we are followers of Jesus Christ, and we really have no other option. He has called us to love our family (1 Timothy 5:8), our friends and neighbors (Luke 10:25-37), and even our enemies (Matthew 5:43-45). That's pretty comprehensive, isn't it?

When we don't walk in the way of love, we're defeating the very point of our lives: to glorify God. It's as if we're lighting a lamp and hiding it under the covers of our bed (Matthew 5:15-16). My wife called me out on this when I was in seminary and a neighborhood conflict arose. A seminary friend and I took his dog for a walk. He is a former offensive lineman and bar-room brawler, the kind of person you don't really want to pick a fight with. He's kind-hearted, loves the Lord, but he has a switch from the old days and you don't want to flip it, or he might go all Ric Flair on you.

His dog (named UGA for the Georgia Bulldogs) went #1 on someone's yard. We had a bag ready in case he decided to go #2, but nothing materialized. After UGA marked this guy's mailbox, we headed on down the sidewalk, but before we got far, a bare chested man came running out with cuss words a blazin'. "You %&\$@# \$#@#\$## \$#@#%\$ just sat there and watched your #\$\$%\$# dog take a \$\$\$% on my yard and laughed about it. Now you are just going to keep walking and not even think about picking it up." I looked over at my buddy and I saw the switch being turned on. His character, his honor, his sense of justice and all that seems good and right about Jesus and apple pie and momma were being threatened. In less than two seconds, they were nose to nose.

Instinctively, I jumped in the middle and pushed my buddy back and finally got him turned in the other direction as they jawed at each other. We took a walk around the lake nearby to cool off. Without question, we should have headed home a different route. We didn't. We walked home past this guy's house again and he is still in the yard, shirt off. In order to try and settle the matter, I said, "Listen, I watched the whole thing. His dog didn't drop one on your yard." Somehow he didn't see my eyewitness evidence as unbiased truth, nor did he appreciate it. Face still red, he said, "Listen you little &\*%, here is the \$%@ right here." Desperate to not look like an idiot, our neighbor picked up a dried dog turd that had to be 3 weeks old, which crumbled as he lifted it. There was no turning back for him at this point, so he ardently, incredulously proclaimed that he had found the smoking gun. Then my lawyer/football switch flipped. "Seriously? A 3 week old dog turd is your evidence. You're kidding, right?" I'm walking (fast) toward the guy, pointing out the absolutely lunacy of his argument. Now I'm nose to nose with this shirtless wonder. Well, truth be told, he's got about 6 inches on me, so I'm forehead to chin with him.

Thankfully, my buddy took over the role of referee and jumped between us and saved the day before it really went south. We headed home, hot and bothered. Our wives were together when we got home and we recounted the injustice of it all over dinner. Somehow, they missed how much of a jerk this guy was. We ran it back for them. Surely, the second time, they would see what an idiot this guy was. They calmly responded, “Really? Two pastors. Great job guys. I’m sure this man really wants to know and love Jesus after your display. Y’all just head right back on down there and ask for forgiveness.” Conviction was starting to settle in, but we predictably tried to bail water out of our sinking ship as we said, “But. This guy started it. He’s a jerk.” Like a mom looking at a four year old making a ridiculous argument, they shook their heads. There was no need to say anything.

So we headed back to this guy’s house. Fortunately, his wife answered the door. We told her that we were coming to make peace and to apologize and wondered if we could speak to her husband. He was sitting in the hot tub, shirtless, beer in hand. “Hey, I am Stephen. We acted like idiots early and we’re really sorry. We both are followers of Jesus and we’re supposed to love people, not fight with them. We did a horrible job of treating you with kindness and respect. We’re neighbors and we walk by here all the time. We’d like to do so with love in our hearts and peace between us. Will you forgive us?”

The dude’s jaw literally dropped. An awkward silence ensued for what seemed like 30 seconds. Finally, he took a long swig of his Budweiser and said, “Sure thing. I just ain’t never had nobody do this before.” I don’t know much about this man today, but I do know we lived in peace and with love for one another for the remainder of our days in Orlando. It could have gone the other way. We could have hit the gossip train and tried to recruit neighbors to our team, letting them know what a jerk our neighbor is. I’m sure we probably would have avoided walking by his street, or, maybe worse, intentionally cruised by again with UGA, knowing what would eventually go down.

Yet, this much is certain. Thanks to our wives, God was glorified. That is what conflict is about. It’s really not about us, but it’s about the power of God working in us to bring glory to His name as we handle conflict in a way that is utterly different from the world. Through His Spirit, we learn to walk in humility, in love, in forgiveness, and in reconciliation.

Many conflicts go much deeper than a dog and a neighbor. They involve adultery in a marriage, a narcissistic spouse, years of abuse, a titanic conflict at work, church hurt, family hurt, and endless other scenarios. When, not if, you experience conflict, you must root yourself in the point of the conflict, and then you need to tap into the power source to handle it.

## **2. Where is the power to handle the conflict?**

I remember being involved in a conflict that hurt deeply and having someone say, “Stephen, we have seen this pattern of behavior for years. It’s who you are. And we have no hope of you changing.” Ouch. My good friend, who pastors a really large church and faced similar accusations, said to me, “Stephen, if that is right about us, then everything we say in our sermons is useless. We have to believe that all of us (including ourselves) can change.” How though? Where do we get the power?

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) has helped untold numbers of people work through conflict because of alcohol addiction in relationships, employment settings, and beyond. According to AA, the first step, and the most important, is to admit that you are powerless to change because of the power of the three-headed monster we face of the devil, the flesh, and the complex, broken world we live in. AA is simply summarizing the Biblical teaching that we, like dogs, return to our vomit (Proverbs 26:11-12) and we find ourselves repeatedly doing what we don't want to do (Romans 7:18-23), mainly because our hearts (apart from Christ) are deceitful and desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9).

All of us have found ourselves entangled in a conflict that feels dizzyingly complex and utterly impossible to navigate. There is no good option or easy solution. It isn't like you can choose door A and everything will be OK. It feels like the hallway you are standing in is on fire behind you and behind Door A is a lion, behind door B is a tiger, and behind door C is a leopard. To stay still is to be burned up, and to move forward is to be chewed up. The first step, according to both AA and the Bible (Romans 7:18-23), is admitting that we are powerless to handle the conflict in front of us because we are powerless to change ourselves or the individual we are in conflict with or the system controlling our environment. We cry out with Paul, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24-25).

Yet this is the only (bad) part of the story that we are powerless to change. The good part—the gospel—is that God isn't powerless and He will give us everything we need to change. He really did rescue us. He took on flesh in the person of Jesus and He reconciled us to Himself and He gave us the power and purpose of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). With each passing day, He is willing and wanting to change us from the inside out to look more and more like His Son Jesus (Romans 8:29). In and through the gospel, we can change. We're not hopelessly stuck, and neither are the people around us, no matter how hopelessly stuck the relationship feels. Jesus put it boldly, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). All things. All systems. All people. Not just some. All. And all means all. All of us, in and through His power, can change.

This is where AA misses it, badly. "Hello, I am \_\_\_\_\_, and I am an alcoholic." True enough. We all have our addictions, but in Christ, our addictions no longer define WHO we are. We have a different identity, and we are called to "put on Christ" daily (Romans. 13:14). Dogs may return to their vomit, but Spirit-filled followers of Jesus don't have to! As we put on Christ and taste and see how much better Jesus is than the old vomit, old and new dogs alike start learning new tricks and walking in new ways. Ahh, the sweetness of the gospel. In and through the gospel, we have access to a spiritual power to handle conflict differently and to experience change in us, in those we are in conflict with, and in the broken system in play.

So before you seek reconciliation, make sure that your cup "runneth over" with the goodness of Jesus. Drink in His forgiveness for all that you have done to Him, to others, and to the world. If the love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control of Jesus are spilling out of your life (Galatians 5:22-23), then I guarantee you the first meeting with the person with whom you are in conflict will be a totally different experience.

### 3. Why is it bothering me so much?

Before you seek reconciliation, you need to get to the heart of the matter: why is this bothering me so much? Sometimes, it's obvious. Your spouse cheated on you. It stings. But then we have those situations that feel more like death by a thousand paper cuts. The problem seems more cumulative and less about one particular event, making it harder to articulate. So start with this question. *Is this situation bothering me because I want something too much?* Biblical idolatry is just that--wanting good things too much. It's taking good things and making them bad things by making them ultimate things. Only God is ultimate; all other good things are penultimate. Here is a list of typical good things we want (or love) too much: power, influence, control, respect, approval, comfort, work, success, relationship, family, reputation, helping, dependence.

Why are we struggling so much? Tim Keller writes, "The specific answer is that there is something besides Jesus Christ that we feel we must have to be happy, something that is more important to our heart than God, something that is enslaving our heart through inordinate desires. The key to change (and even to self-understanding) is therefore to identify the idols of the heart."<sup>1</sup> What happens is that we have desires that get overheated (Galatians 5:24). The Greek word is *epithumia*, and it literally means an over-desire, an all-controlling drive and longing. Think about it. This means our central problem isn't desiring bad things but rather over-desiring good things.

Often, the person who has wronged us has blocked, threatened, challenged, or questioned a good thing, like our reputation. We can't get over it and we spin on it. It consumes our thought life. We replay the tape, endlessly. It wakes us up at night. In some cases, our own repentance will help us move past the issue without even needing to confront the other party. They aren't the problem, our idolatry is. When we repent, the problem goes away, or at the very least, is cast in a whole new light, which leads to our next question..

### 4. Can I and should I overlook it?

Once we've repented of our idolatry, sometimes things still bother us, and, in matters of deep pain and great injustice, they should. The question becomes can you, and should you, overlook it? Overlook is the key word. Proverbs 19:11 says, "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to **overlook** an offense." Sometimes you can overlook the offense, but you shouldn't, for a *Biblical* reason; other times you can't overlook it, but you should, for an *idolatrous* reason we discussed above. In sum, if it's really more about your idolatry than the magnitude of the offense, then repent and overlook it.

On the other hand, some offenses can't and shouldn't be overlooked. What are those Biblical reasons that shouldn't be overlooked?

Ken Sande provides a helpful summary, noting that "overlooking clearly isn't the right choice when a wrong...

- Is damaging your relationship with others
- Is hurting you
- Is hurting the offender;
- Is significantly dishonoring God."<sup>2</sup>

These are helpful categories to know when love demands addressing an issue. Essentially, if significant damage is done (and often will continue to be done) to yourself, to others, to the offender, or to God, then love demands you to address it. When faced with divisive and hard issues, we're called to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15), and in doing so we "walk in the way of love" (Ephesians 5:2).

## 5. How do I handle it if I can't or shouldn't overlook the offense?

### 1. Love by getting the log out of your eye first

Me? Get the log out of my eye? Yes, Jesus says, you. "But, they started it. Besides, they are like 90% of the problem, and that is being generous." Irrelevant. Objection overruled. First, get the log out of your own eye (Matthew 7:3-5).

Why? Because when you eventually go to the person with whom you are conflict, it will help you go in humility, not prideful arrogance. Humility acknowledges that any time two people are involved, two sinners are involved. Always.

Let me show you the power of humble, introspective, log hunts. A very good friend, whom I admire greatly, experienced the pain of his wife having an affair. Courageously (and incredulously) he searched for the log in his own eye first. I'll never forget him telling me, "Her affair is my fault." Somewhat dumbfounded, I responded, "How's that?" Resolutely, he stated, "Because I was absent. I loved work more than I loved my wife. She had an affair with a guy and I had an affair with work. Work was my god and, as a result, I fell asleep at the wheel in my marriage. I didn't love and serve my wife as Christ loved his bride. I caused her affair."

Who says that? A man with his eyes on the prize: Jesus. When he went to his wife, he went humbly, with tears, and asked her to forgive him, and he meant it. She told him she didn't love him. Here is how he responded to her: "I can't change your heart, only God can. The good news is that God raises the dead! He WILL breathe life into our marriage. He wants to use us to tell a beautiful story to the world. A story about a marriage resurrection from the dead. Until then, I'm here to be your ever-present companion on this journey. I'm holding your hand walking one step at a time, leading but not pushing, and not ever looking back." He prayed, loved, and served. Forgiveness and reconciliation came, not immediately, but eventually, for both. Today, they have one of the best marriages on the planet. It all started with his courage to get the log out of his eye first! Friends, anything is possible if we follow Jesus' playbook on reconciliation! No situation is too complex or too broken. Not a one!

### (2) Love by confessing your sin

You can't confess your sin if you haven't first done the hard work of introspectively going on a log hunt for your sin. If you do, however, your first meeting with the person you are in conflict with should begin with your confession. Ken Sande provides helpful insights for all of us as we're thinking about confession through what he calls "**the seven A's of confession:**"<sup>3</sup>

1. Address everyone involved (All those whom you affected)
2. Avoid if, but, and maybe (Do not try to excuse your wrongs)
3. Admit specifically (Both attitudes and actions)
4. Acknowledge the hurt (Express sorrow for hurting someone)

5. Accept the consequences (Such as making restitution)
6. Alter your behavior (Change your attitudes and actions)
7. Ask for forgiveness (And allow time)

With those elements of confession in mind, here's the deal: It doesn't matter, at all, who is primarily responsible for causing the conflict. Even if the person you are in conflict with is 90% responsible (and started it), the goal is for you to own 100% of your 10%. In my experience, when you begin the meeting with a humble, confession of your own sin, it isn't that the issues all go away and everything is all better, but the temperature of the room changes. It's almost as if somebody turns on the air conditioning in a sweltering room. There's a fresh breeze of hope and the combative atmosphere normally calms quite a bit. Not to mention the healing that takes place in your own heart, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16). Who doesn't want to be healed? Healed of pride, bitterness, stress—you name it!

If we're honest, we struggle mightily to begin with confession. To begin with, we're scared that it might be used against us. One person came to me mired in a complex, multi-layered conflict involving a significant number of employees in the company (not Movement). They said, "I know that I am culpable on many levels, but I'm afraid to admit the depth and breadth of my sin because I'm afraid they will just use it against me." Mix in the litigious world we live in and confession in our culture is like a dinosaur on the edge of extinction.

Yet Paul says things that are so incredibly incriminating like, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15). Scandalous. And if you are a Christian, you may breeze past this, either because of familiarity or thinking Paul was hyperbolizing, as all good preachers do. Stop. If you admit to being the worst of all sinners, then you are going on record as saying, "Hitler was a pretty good guy compared to me."

However, we don't think this way. I remember coming face to face with my sin during a prolonged and painful conflict that, sadly, revealed patterns of sinful behavior in my life that had formed over a lifetime. I found myself needing to confess, "I've hurt you, and I didn't even know I was doing it. I'm realizing that I'm a dangerous person who unintentionally hurts people, which makes me all the more dangerous because I don't do it intentionally or consciously." At first, I had to convince myself of this. Learning to live with it was hard and it took practice. Everything inside of me wanted to rationalize it away and I would have, if it weren't for the glory of the gospel giving me the courage to face my sin head-on. The gospel is a message about a God who has a heart for dangerous people like me. The gospel headlines good news that despite patterns of sinful behavior, God calls me His beloved son and is crazy about me. His unchangeable love and unalterable proclamation of me as His beloved son (Matthew 3:17) gives me the courage I need to admit the shadowy side of who I am. Bewildered sinner; beloved son. The two must be paired together or despair quickly takes over.

I'm a lawyer, so I'm well aware that incriminating statements can be used against you, but if the pendulum needs to swing in any direction in our overly litigious society, it is certainly in the direction of trusting our future to God, not lawyers. Think of how many lawsuits God might head off if we are willing to walk in humility, confession, and repentance.

Remember, the things you are able to call to mind are often the tip of the iceberg of your sin. When you actually come face-to-face with the person you are in conflict with, you will begin the meeting by confessing the tip of the iceberg. Then, you will need to listen and invite them to share with you what's below the surface that you can't see. "Help me get it. What am I missing? Are there areas of hurt I have caused that I haven't confessed or just don't get?"

### *(3) Love by assuming the best*

It's so easy to assume the worst. We do it all the time and no one, including ourselves, is better off. Yet hear this, "love is ever ready to believe the best of every person" (1 Corinthians 13:7 AMPC). Love stands ready to believe the best. Yes, including when they blow it, again, and again, and again. Why? Because we all want to be given a second and third and fourth chance. Jesus recognized this and commanded us to forgive 70 x 7 times (Matthew 18:22). Believe the best about a person or situation before you know the full story rather than after the fact, even in the face of repetitive failure. We haven't yet met with the party who offended us or with the party we offended to hear their side of the story. In their absence, it is oh so easy to demonize and vilify the party who harmed us, assigning the worst motives and interpretations of their actions. Then we go to a friend, as opposed to going to the person, to vent and we engage in some good old fashioned gossip. After we do, we cover our tracks at the end by saying, "I just wanted you to pray about this." No! Go to the person first and assume the best until you've met with them. Start there. Next week, we'll look at how to handle that first meeting. This week is all about prepping for that first meeting.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. When it comes to conflict, would those closest to you describe you as fight or flight?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 10:31. What is the point of conflict? How does maintaining a focus on the point of conflict help you in the conflict?
3. Read 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 and Romans. 8:29. Describe the power that you have to handle conflict and how you access it?
4. Read Proverbs 19:11. Discuss the four principles that help you establish when you can or should overlook an offense. Apply these to one conflict in your life.

## **Endnotes**

1. Timothy Keller, *The Gospel in Life: Grace Changes Everything* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2010), 40.
2. Ken Sande, *Resolving Everyday Conflict* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2011), 55.
3. Sande, *Resolving Everyday Conflict*, 63-67.