

How to Resolve Conflict Biblically

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“Conflict” is any difference of opinion among people in which someone is frustrated by the difference. Notice that on that definition, conflict doesn’t necessarily involve sin. Many conflicts are the result of misunderstanding or miscommunication. We need some conflicts to work through problems faithfully and wisely. Those kinds of conflicts aren’t necessarily harmful. But far too often, conflicts arise from sinful attitudes and behaviors.

Conflicts are inevitable among people who live or work closely together. That’s why so many conflicts happen in the home, the church, and in the workplace. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul addressed a conflict between two women in the church. He called on these two women to resolve their conflict biblically and in accordance with the gospel: “I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord” (Phil 4:2). Paul’s charge to them was that they come to “agree.” We should all seek agreement with our brothers and sisters in Christ (1 Cor 1:10). But we should seek agreement “in the Lord.” That means there’s a biblical way to resolve conflict.

Here’s an outline of the biblical method of conflict resolution I’ve used many times in my own life. I’m greatly indebted to Ken Sande’s volume, *The Peacemaker* for this approach. If you don’t have his book, get it, and read it. It’s a treasure of faithful instruction.

1. Glorify God and the Gospel of Christ. In order to engage in healthy, biblical conflict resolution, we need to decide beforehand that we’re going to believe and do whatever the Lord Jesus says in His Word. We must set our minds on the gospel of Christ and His great love for us, knowing that whatever He says in His Word is good and right.
2. Get the log out of your own eye. Matthew 7:5 says, “First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” That means before you address the sin in someone else’s life, confess your sins against the other person. Don’t sugarcoat your sin by saying something like, “I felt frustrated by what you said. I should have kept my cool.” Instead use blunt biblical terminology to identify your sin. Say, “I murdered you in my heart and with my words, and what I said was a terrible sin” (Matt 5:21-22). Or, “I lied to you.”

Don’t make any excuses for your sin. Avoid saying things like “If I hurt you, I’m sorry.” Or, “I got angry, but I wouldn’t have, if you had done what I asked you to do.” When getting the log out of your own eye, do not excuse yourself or shift any blame to the other person. You’re only talking about your own sin at this point. There will be an opportunity to confront the other person later, but for now, just confess your own sin.

Even if you can’t think of any serious sin you’ve committed in this conflict, you can usually find something to confess. You may often be able to say something like: “I should have listened to you more carefully, and failure to do that was selfish and unloving.”

After confessing your sins, ask for forgiveness. Don’t just say “I’m sorry,” which means “I feel sad about my sin.” Instead, you need to ask for forgiveness, specifically. Say, “Will you please forgive me for my sins?”

3. Go and show your brother his fault. After getting the log out of your own eye, you're in a position to go and show your brother his fault. Matthew 18:15 says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone."

That said, the Bible also teaches us that it's normally wise to overlook the sins and offenses of others. We shouldn't confront every sin we see in another person. Proverbs 19:11 says, "It is his glory to overlook an offense." Proverbs 12:16 says, "The prudent ignores an insult." See also Proverbs 17:14, 1 Peter 4:8, and Colossians 3:13. It's best to overlook as many sins and offenses as we possibly can without confronting them. But we should only do so on the following conditions: (1) the sin or offense does not bring public reproach on the name of Christ; (2) there is no wall between you and the other person; and (3) there is no serious harm to others. If a sin or offense cannot be overlooked faithfully, then follow the pattern of Matthew 18.

Also, when confronting another person, consider the specific sins the other person has committed, and think of specific biblical texts that identify the sin. You might find it helpful to think about whether the other person has broken one of the 10 commandments (Ex 20). The reason for trying to identify sin biblically is that you don't want to approach another person with your own independent thoughts, opinions, or feelings. Your thoughts and feelings may be wrong, and they're often debatable in conflict situations. So, you need to make sure you're thinking biblically, and you need to make sure that you're able show the other person that your concern isn't based on your own opinion, but on the Bible.

Finally, when you confront another person, you should lovingly engage him in conversation rather than telling him how he has sinned or hurling accusations at him (2 Sam 12:1-7; Esther 5:1-8; 7:1-7). That's why it's so important to ask questions when you confront others. For example, you might say, "Do you think the way you spoke to me a few moments ago was loving?" If the person says "Yes, I think it was loving. I don't understand what you're talking about." Then you might open your Bible to Ephesians 4:31-32 and say, "Do you think the way you spoke to me was consistent with this text?" The goal of confrontation is to start a conversation, not make accusations.

4. Go and be reconciled to your brother. Colossians 3:12-14 says, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

When you forgive someone, you're turning away from your sinful anger. Because Christ has forgiven you and because He loves you, you choose not to dwell on a personal offense, hurt feelings, or angry thoughts toward another person. Forgiveness in this sense is not optional for believers. Matthew 6:15 says, "If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." For believers, forgiveness is based on the fact that Christ has forgiven us of our sins (Matt 18:21-35). Every Christian is obligated to extend this sort of forgiveness.

Full forgiveness, however, goes beyond merely repenting of sinful anger. It ultimately means reconciling a broken relationship. Full forgiveness is, therefore, conditioned upon the offending party's sincere repentance. Luke 17:3 says, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him." God does not require you to reconcile your broken relationship with someone, if he has not repented of his sins. Some Christians wrongly think that all sinners are entitled to full forgiveness. But that's not true. Full forgiveness depends on the repentance of the sinning party.

Forgiveness involves a number of promises. They're the same promises God in Christ makes to us when He forgives us of our sins (1 Cor 13:5; Ps 103:12; Isa 43:25).

The Four Promises of Forgiveness

One Unconditional Promise:

1. I will not dwell on or brood about this incident. Here you promise someone who has sinned against you that you will not continue to harbor anger or hurt feelings in your mind and heart. The Bible tells us that love is not "irritable or resentful" (1 Cor 12:5). "Everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Matt 5:21). Remaining angry, hurt or resentful will only hurt you and dishonor Christ. Though forgiving in this way can be very difficult, we must do it because Christ has forgiven us, and because He requires it of us. "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against someone so that you Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses" (Mk 11:25).

Three Promises Conditioned on the Repentance of the Offending Party:

2. I will not bring up this incident to use it against you. If a person sincerely repents of his sin, then you can promise him that you won't keep any record of his wrong. You don't need to keep dragging it up again in future conflicts. This is the same way God forgives us. "As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us" (Ps 103:12). God doesn't use our sins against us. To those who have repented of their sins, He declares, "I will not remember your sins [against you]" (Is 43:25).

3. I will not talk to others about this incident. This promise is an extension of the one above. If a person sincerely repents, then you're free to promise not to talk to others about the sin or conflict. If a person persists unrepentantly in sin, then you must not make this promise, since you'll need to involve others to help you resolve the conflict. But, if he has repented, there isn't any need to involve anyone else.

4. I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship. If a person has sincerely repented, and you've forgiven him, there isn't any sin standing in the way of your personal relationship. You're free to be reconciled and be on friendly terms with one another, open to growing further in your relationship, if possible, and as the trust between the two of you continues to grow. When we repent of our sins and God forgives us, our sins no longer stand in the way of a relationship with God.

When you ask someone to forgive you, you're asking a lot from that person. You're asking someone you have wronged to make enormous promises to you. If you've sinned against someone, that person may not be able to make all of these promises immediately. Be patient with those you have wronged, and keep loving them. Do not demand that they forgive you quickly. Sometimes, forgiveness can take a long time, and if you're the offending party, you shouldn't be the one demanding that the person forgive you. If you sin repeatedly against someone, he may have trouble believing that you're truly repentant. If this happens, get a wise third party involved to help you resolve the conflict.

[In cases of abuse, full forgiveness must not be extended. Though this post is not about abuse, I need to say a few words about it here. When there is abuse, the abused party must be protected (Ps 82:4), and abusers must be held accountable for their sins (Ex 22:22-24; Is 10:1-2). The Bible tells us that it's foolish to have a close relationship with someone who abuses you (Prov 22:24). It also says that the majority of abusers return to their abuse (Prov 19:19; 26:11, 12, 16; 27:22), which means genuine repentance is rare for abusers, and, therefore, identifying genuine repentance in an abuser is difficult.

You should only conclude that an abuser is repentant after much time and in the presence of a multitude of counselors, including your pastors.]

May the Lord give us much grace to walk in love for one another, to forgive as we've been forgiven, and to be more conformed to the likeness of the One who bought us with His blood.