

7 Keys to Handling Conflict

“Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go on your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23-24).

Had any good conflicts lately? No, I don't mean any conflicts, I mean good conflicts. In other words, there was something that needed to be addressed, and, as much as it depended on you, things went well.

Part of the reason we hate conflict is because, generally, they go so poorly. But maybe we just aren't doing it very well. Below is a seven-step process for handling conflict based on God's principles. Take a look and see how it compares to how you deal with someone who has hurt you:

1. Have they sinned against you or did you just want them to do something differently? So you're upset about something, and you want to go talk to the person. But before you start a conflict, ask yourself, “Did they do something wrong?” Often we go to a person and act as if they've done something wrong when really they just haven't done what we wanted them to do. “I'm mad because you don't want to see the movie I want to see.” Uh, that isn't a sin; it is a difference of opinion. Try having a conflict with someone who insists you are wrong just because you aren't doing what they want. It won't go very well. So don't be that person. Differences of opinion require compromise not conflict.

2. Have the courage to address the problem-directly. OK, so you believe the person has done something wrong and you need to address it. So, go ahead and address it ... with them. This means you don't share it with everyone in the world except them. And it means you don't try to address it by sneak

attack, passively sliding it into a conversation so they'll figure it out. If they've done something wrong, God wants you to go talk to them, directly. Try this, "There is something that has been bothering me and I'd like to work through it." Nice and direct.

3. Don't sin in your anger. Let's imagine that you are absolutely correct, this person has wronged you and you are completely innocent. So you start to talk to them. At first things are going great; you are patient but firm. But then something they say honks you off and you start calling them names.

Uh oh, now things are getting really messy.

There was nothing wrong with being angry. Anger is not a sin. The problem is how we handle it. God wants us to be under control with our anger. But if we aren't careful we can lose our cool. Even though we came into the conflict totally innocent, now we aren't. Stay under control in a conflict. If you can't, take a break and come back. Losing your temper just makes a bigger mess.

4. Be specific. When you are telling someone what is wrong you have to be specific. Give a couple of examples. "I feel hurt when you criticize me in front of our friends. You did it last night when we had Bill and Janie over, and you did it last week when Mike and Beth were here." Being specific helps make the conflict objective. If you don't give examples the person will simply make it a difference of opinion. "I feel hurt when you criticize me in front of our friends." "I don't criticize you in front of our friends." "Yes, you do." "No I don't." That's not going anywhere. Also, avoid the word always. "You always criticize me in front of our friends." In all likelihood, they don't always do it. If there was one time in history that they didn't, they will spend all their energy looking for that one time to prove you wrong ... instead of listening to what you are saying.

5. Balance grace and truth. Generally, I'm too sappy in a conflict. Even if you are totally wrong, I'll tend to let you off the hook and probably do all the apologizing. I put too much mushy grace into my conflicts. On the other hand, some people are like marine drill sergeants. They won't let it go until you've confessed, repented and done 100 push ups as a consequence. Those people are all truth, and they aren't fun people to have a conflict with. The answer is the right balance of both grace and truth. I need to be kind without letting you off the hook. I need to require you to take responsibility for your behavior but still let you know that I care about you.

6. Know what you need. What's it going to take to make this right? If it was something relatively minor, maybe all you need is an apology. If it was something huge, maybe you are going to need them to get professional help.

Only you know what you need to repair the relationship. But don't skip this step. Suppose they apologize, but later you decide that wasn't enough. Now you go back and have the conflict again. "I've already apologized," they say. "But that didn't do it for me," you reply. Uh, that isn't going to go well. Before you enter the conflict decide, in advance, what it is going to take to make things right.

7. Forgive. Finally, forgive. Sounds easy and obvious right. Well, try doing it some time. Or, even worse, try resolving a conflict without it. Forgiveness is a choice that we make to let it go. It let's them off the hook.

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Reconciliation requires that they have taken responsibility for their actions and are changing their behavior. It requires two people. Forgiveness only requires one—you. This step isn't really about them. It is about you. Regardless of their response, you've done what you could. Now its time to move on. Forgive them ... unforgiveness only keeps you a prisoner.

Conflict can be tough, and the topic could fill a whole book not just a blog entry. But these seven steps are a great place to start. Next time you have to address a problem, put them into practice. If you do, you may be surprised to find that you just had a good conflict.

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