

Grace in Conflict

✖ One of the greatest weaknesses within the body of Christ is our paranoia when it comes to handling conflict. Regardless of how many Scripture verses we learn about addressing it, we still treat it like the plague.

Why don't we deal with discord truthfully and without fear? Jesus taught us "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matt. 5:9, NKJV), but we seem to have translated His words this way: "Blessed are the doormats." However, the truth is, peacemakers clearly practice the skill of negotiation during conflict.

For most of our married life, even though my husband and I were home-group leaders and active in the church, we had no idea how to constructively address conflict. Outside the home we worked hard to create the illusion that we were happy and carefree. But behind closed doors we were miserable.

My husband, Jim, had his way to deal with offenses: He perfected the art of intimidation. To keep me from penetrating his own deep sorrows, Jim withheld approval and affection. When my husband's behavior alternated between cold silences and outbursts of anger, I held my tongue.

Although my lips might not have expressed my pain over

Jim's behavior, my heart grew weary under the weight of unresolved conflict. Instead of following the instructions of Matthew 18:15 and speaking openly to Jim after each series of offenses, I'd think, How peaceful life would be if he were simply gone.

Some days, my dread of him was so complete I secretly hoped that he would have a fatal accident coming home from work during one of our wild Pennsylvania snowstorms. No more walking on eggshells and complying out of fear! But at the end of the day, his car always pulled into the driveway, and I returned to my agonizing role as the people-pleaser—hoping to win his kindness.

We were locked in a solitary world of fear where no one would tell the truth. As a result, reality was never discussed. Although we knew that God wanted something better for us, we felt powerless to change. The hopelessness of our situation loomed large, and we were ready to call it quits.

But God had a different plan in the works.

True Grace

If the truth be told, many of us don't believe that God loves us unconditionally. Since the day of our salvation we have been collecting and harboring a secret list of behavioral law we feel we must obey to gain His approval.

We struggle to be worthy but never feel secure, never certain we have the validity to act on God's Word and expect the promised results. Since it takes confidence and a strong sense of our personal value to God to address conflict, we are unable to bring true healing into tense situations. Instead, we use fleshly behaviors to cope:

- *Murder* (imagining our "adversaries" dead, wishing something awful would happen to them to take them out of our lives)
- *Compensation and compliance* (turning ourselves inside out trying to please and bring peace)
- *Intimidation* (alternating between the silent treatment and outbursts of anger)
- *Avoidance or denial* (pretending everything is all right, tiptoeing around the problems, purposely staying away from the person, living in emotional isolation)
- *Character assassination* (disclosing our adversaries' faults, often in an exaggerated way, to others; attempting to build our own credibility by destroying theirs).

It wasn't until Jim and I met with a team of counselors trained in inner healing that we learned how to grab hold of grace and resolve the conflict in our lives. Amazingly, when I finally acknowledged my own unfulfilled needs, gave up my self-righteous compliance and told Jim that I would no longer take responsibility for

his anger, the Holy Spirit opened my eyes.

He showed me the truth: The sins of my heart were as hellish as the sins of my husband's temper. I had to embrace His grace for my own inadequacies and sins.-

Jim encountered the true target of his anger: God. As he began to forgive his parents, other authority figures, himself and ultimately God for allowing his pain, the love of God penetrated his heart and changed it forever. Met with forgiveness, truth was no longer a thing to fear.

Jim needed God's grace, too.

How we learn to deal with conflict as children affects how we respond to one another as adults—in our homes, at church or in the workplace. Although I loved God deeply, I was always unsure of His approval. I knew I wasn't perfect, so I lacked confidence when it came to addressing unfairness or sin against me. Perhaps I believed I deserved it.

I had learned compensation and avoidance behaviors in tense situations, mistaking them for humility and peacemaking. I carried those behaviors from childhood into marriage. For many years I also engaged in them to deal with conflict in the ministry.

When I forgave my parents for portraying me to the world as a model of perfection and myself for hiding my true feelings and

needs in order to protect God's reputation, I realized God was more interested in my being authentic in my relationships with Him and others. I began to sense God's complete acceptance whether I played the "Christian role" correctly or not.

We must grasp the reality of grace. It provides a release from thinking we have to be perfect in order to be loved. We have too narrowly defined the power of Christ's death and resurrection.

We behave as though the battle were ours, to be won by our own devices. If only we understood that "by grace [we] have been saved (Eph. 2:5)." We are constantly being saved from our old ways by a living relationship with God. This is the same God who has paid the price for every weakness within us and others, year after year, every day of our lives.

Our repentance and His ready forgiveness restore us quickly and give us the courage to trust Him to change us from the inside out. Christ is our Redeemer. When we repent of both our pitiful attempts to rescue ourselves and our demands that others redeem us by changing, we will become free to see and say the truth.

The glory of being forgiven causes us to cherish Him so much that others' power to color our views is destroyed. Intimacy with Him brings new understanding. Living in love with One who

embraces us

when all others flee brings us to surrender to His Spirit's work in us, no matter what the earthly consequence.

When we are wrong, we can embrace discipline and correction without shame, knowing it will do us good. As we rest in His unfailing love others lose their ability to diminish or destroy us with their judgments or actions. Suddenly, we see the truth of everyone's responsibilities within the conflict. When we are wronged, we will discover an amazing reserve of compassion for even the most offensive!

Dying to Live

Until we are convinced of God's grace toward others and us we will never be able to behave justly. Without grace, the extremes of victimization or control and manipulation will haunt our responses.

As we learn to live by grace, we die to providing our own security. We see Jesus spreading a table filled with all the safety we need, right in the presence of those who we fear would like to destroy us. Out of that safety we are able to speak lovingly and compassionately to those who offend us or undermine our every move.

If grace has not arrived for them yet, the law and the need to be "right" still hold them in a tight grip. They fight the lonely, futile battle of self-preservation—preservation of a

self that
does nothing but keep them in turmoil.

Death is what we all need—death to performing for
approval, being the smartest, being right. If we don't resist
trusting
God through such a death, intimacy will be in our reach.

Dying to our old self-protecting ways during conflict is a
lot like free-falling from a cliff high above His invisible
arms,
trusting that He will catch us. It means we will not grab at
the
branches of argument, justification or accusation on the way
down but
will look instead toward heaven as we fall, everything staked
on His
Word to us.

We can trust the Father. Jesus has shown us that He will
never betray our trust; He will always catch us. Our Father is
faithful
and kind. His mercy endures forever. He will never leave us or
forsake
us, and He will forgive us over and over again.

Furthermore, His Spirit will guide us into all truth and
teach us supernaturally what we could never figure out
intellectually.
Out of the manifest love of God comes the confidence to deal
honestly,
openly and fearlessly with the conflicts we face as we
encounter daily a
stumbling world and our own flesh.

Without grace, how awful we can be to one another! How
locked into continual pain and insecurity we are when our
identity is in

what we try to be instead of who we are in Christ. As we abandon our laws of worthiness and accept His unconditional love for us, we will be able to face conflict seeking truth rather than concentrating on self-protection. It is possible to cast our cares on Him and trust His ways with abandon when we face what we fear.

As we open our hearts, we learn to be true peacemakers. When grace has taken hold and we know how much we are loved by God, we can experience conflict without rancor and address it without being intimidated. Because we have tasted His heart-changing love and forgiveness for ourselves, we are convinced that He has the power to change and reconcile others' hearts as well. Out of this conviction, we will have the courage to lovingly and openly address difficult issues and help bring genuine resolution.

Remember that as we give up our weaknesses and receive God's strength in the face of conflict, grace will own the day.

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