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5. Foundation Five: Conflict Resolution In Marriage

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How should couples resolve conflict in marriage?

Conflict is, essentially, part of human nature. After Adam sinned in the Garden, conflict ensued. When God asked him if he had eaten of the forbidden tree, he did not simply say, “Yes.” He said, “The woman you gave me, gave me the fruit and I did eat.” He indirectly blamed God and directly blamed the woman. The woman then blamed the serpent. When sin entered the world, so did conflict. In fact, God said that one of the results of sin would be conflict between the man and the woman. The wife would desire to control the husband and the husband would try to dominate the woman by force ([Gen 3:16](#)).

As we go throughout the biblical narrative, we continually see the fruit of sin displayed in conflict. In [Genesis 4](#), Cain killed his brother Abel. In the same chapter, Cain’s son, Lamech, killed another man and



conflict has continued throughout history. The world has known no time without war or conflict, and unfortunately, marriages are not exempt.

Paul taught that one of the fruits of the flesh, our sin nature, is “discord” ([Gal 5:20](#)). We are prone to offend others, to be offended, to hate, to withhold forgiveness, and to divide. Sadly, all these fruits are prone to blossom within the marriage union. Couples should be aware of this, and therefore, prepare to resolve conflict in marriage. How should couples resolve conflict in marriage?

In Conflict, We Must Have the Right Attitude

The first principle necessary to resolve conflict is to have the right attitude—one of joyful expectation in God. It is good to remember that conflict does not necessarily have to be detrimental to a marriage relationship. Conflict, as with all trials, is meant to test our faith, reveal sin in our hearts, develop character, and draw us closer to God (cf. [Rom 5:3-5](#), [Jam 1:2-4](#)). Paul said this: “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” ([Rom 5:3-4](#)). Similarly, James said, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance” ([James 1:2-3](#)). Paul said that we should rejoice in sufferings, and James said we should consider it “pure joy” when we encounter them because of God’s purposes in them. God does not waste suffering, including conflict within marriage. God uses conflict to make us grow into the image of Christ (cf. [Rom 8:28-29](#)), which should be our ultimate goal.

Many times God uses our spouse as sand paper to smooth out areas in our life that don’t reflect Christ. It has often been said, “Marriage is not about happiness; it is about holiness. And when we are holy, then we will truly be happy.” In marriage, we enter the ultimate accountability relationship, which is meant to help us grow as God’s children (cf. [Eph 5:25-27](#)).

Therefore, as James taught ([James 1:2](#)) and Paul taught ([Rom 5:3](#)), we should encounter marital conflict (and all trials) with joyful expectation, not because we enjoy suffering, but because we know God’s purposes in it. We worship a God who took the worst sin that ever happened in the world, the murder of his Son, and made it the best thing. It is for this reason that we can have a joyful expectation, even in conflict. This isn’t a denial of pain. It is both a recognition of pain and a future hope. It is like a mother



What is your attitude when you encounter conflict with your mate? If we don't have the right attitude, if we are angry at our mate and angry at God, if we are depressed, bitter, and disillusioned, then it will negatively affect our behavior and our spouse, and therefore, reap harmful consequences in marriage. Conflict is really just an opportunity to grow, and we should view it that way.

What is your attitude during conflict? Do you have a joyful expectation of the work that God wants to do? Do you expect him to make you holier? Do you expect him to strengthen your capacity to love? That's how Scripture tells us to view all trials.

In Conflict, We Must Develop Perseverance

In continuing with what Paul and James taught about trials, both taught that trials produce perseverance. Paul then said perseverance produces character and character hope ([Rom 5:3-4](#)). James said that we should "let perseverance finish its work so that we can become mature and complete, not lacking anything" ([James 1:3-4](#), NIV 2011). In marital conflict, we must develop perseverance so we can produce the fruits God wants to cultivate in our marriage.

This is difficult because the natural response to trials and conflict is to bail or quit. And that's what many couples do. At some point they say, "That's enough; I can't live like this" and they quit. Some do this by divorcing, others by distancing themselves emotionally and physically, as they stop working to fix the marriage. However, Scripture teaches us to persevere in trials, which includes conflict. The word means to "bear up under a heavy weight." God matures us individually and corporately as we bear up under the heavy weight. He teaches us to trust him more. He helps us develop peace, patience, and joy, regardless of our circumstances. He helps us grow in character as we "let perseverance finish its work."

In order to resolve conflict, we must develop perseverance. That's essentially what we promised to do in our wedding vows. We committed to love our spouse in sickness and in health, for better or for worse. We should be thankful when it is "better" and persevere when it is "worse". For those who do, there is fruit. Paul said, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" ([Galatians 6:9](#)).

Do you feel like quitting? Hold on, because God has a harvest for you if you don't quit.

In Conflict, We Must Sow Good Seeds

Not only must we have the right attitude when encountering conflict, but we also must sow the right



principle God set throughout the earth, and it is at work within every marriage as well. If we sow negative seeds, we will reap negative fruit. If we sow positive seeds, we will reap positive fruit.

Sadly, even though we all want a positive harvest in our marriage, we typically respond in ways that are counter to that. A wife wants her husband to spend more time with her, but in order to get that, she criticizes him. The fruit she desires is opposite of the seed she is sowing. The seed of criticism will only produce a negative fruit in her husband. Similarly, a husband, who wants intimacy with his wife, actually begins to withdraw from her. He withdraws hoping that this will draw her closer, but it actually does the opposite. The negative seed of withdrawing cannot produce the positive fruit of intimacy.

In conflict, we must do the opposite of what our nature desires. We may have a desire to raise our voice, and/or to hurt the other person, but these seeds will only produce negative fruits and potentially destruction in the marriage. To resolve conflict, we must always sow the right seeds.

Similarly, consider what Paul taught about how we should respond to an enemy. He said:

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

[Romans 12:19-21](#)

Paul taught that in response to an enemy, we must overcome evil with good. Instead of responding with anger or seeking revenge, we should sow kindness and generosity. If he is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. Instead of being overcome by evil, we must overcome evil by continually sowing good.

What good seeds can we sow while we are in conflict? Maybe, it could be the good seed of a listening ear. It could be the seed of affirmation. It could be the seed of service. Certainly, it must be the seed of unconditional love. In conflict, we must sow good seeds to reap a good harvest.

With that said, we must always remember that conflict resolution is very much like farming. Sometimes, it may take months or years to get the harvest we desire. Many become discouraged while waiting for their spouse to change or for the conflict to be resolved. Typically, in that discouragement, people start to sow negative seeds that only hinder the harvest they seek. A verse worth repeating while considering conflict resolution is, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" ([Galatians 6:9](#)). We must not only sow good seeds, but we must faithfully do



What type of negative seeds do you have a tendency to sow when in conflict? How is God calling you to sow positive seeds to reap a positive harvest?

In Conflict, We Must Talk to Our Spouse First Before Others

Another important principle to apply in conflict is talking to our spouse first before talking to anybody else. This is a principle that Christ taught about dealing with sin in general. In [Matthew 18:15](#) he said, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”

This is important for several reasons. First, it shows respect for our spouse. It is disrespectful to discuss a problem with our mom, our friend, or anybody else not first discussed with our spouse. If our spouse finds out, it may actually cause more conflict. Secondly, every story has two sides, and those who are closest to us (such as family and friends) may not have the ability to give us unbiased counsel. Even for myself, as a pastoral counselor, I have to work really hard to not jump to conclusions after hearing only one side of the story. This does not mean that we shouldn't talk to those closest to us, we should, but only after trying to resolve it with our spouse first. And when we do talk to others, we should still respect and honor our spouse.

Christ taught that when somebody sins against us, we should go to that person first ([Matt 18:15](#)). Many couples increase their conflict by bringing others in without first seeking to resolve it with their spouse alone.

In Conflict, We Must Seek Wise Counselors

Though this point may seem like it contradicts the previous one, it doesn't. Christ taught that we should confront a person in sin one on one, and if they don't respond, then invite others into the process, including the church. [Matthew 18:16-17](#) says this:

But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Though this was originally spoken about a brother in sin, it certainly applies to sin or conflict within marriage. God made us part of the body of Christ, which includes our marriage. When a natural body is sick, it often results in fever. In a fever, the body simply wants itself to bring healing. In the same way, a



For many, this is countercultural. While in serious conflict, many couples hesitate to invite anybody into their marriage to help. Pride keeps them from exposing themselves and getting the help they need. This is actually another result of the Fall. When Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree, they looked at one another, saw their nakedness, and hid. They then put on fig leaves. At the Fall, humanity lost its intended transparency. We hide from one another; we put on a fake smile even when things are bad. We hide behind our clothes, our houses, our jobs, and our hobbies. We are deathly afraid of people knowing us: our insecurities and our problems. We even hide from God, as Adam and Eve did.

However, in order to build the healthy marriage God meant for us, we must be willing to expose ourselves and seek help. In [Matthew 18](#), Christ said that if approaching the person in sin does not work, we should bring one or two others for accountability. If that doesn't help, invite the church. And if that doesn't help, the church should lovingly discipline the erring mate. This is difficult, but if we are followers of Christ, we must trust he knows best. God wants to use other godly people to speak into our marriage and sharpen it as iron sharpens iron ([Prov 27:17](#)).

Who would you invite to help your marriage? They should be wise people who can understand you, and who are walking with Christ—preferably a married couple. Solomon said: “For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure” ([Prov 11:14](#)).

Every president or king selects a cabinet with many advisers. The cabinet advises the president on foreign policy, educational reform, health care, etc., and this multitude of counselors helps bring victory. In the same way, a marriage needs a multitude of counselors, especially when in conflict. Yes, a couple should try to resolve the problem together first, but after that, they should seek help.

This should be considered even before getting married. Who will be your “many advisers” that make victory sure? It could be your parents, a wise couple in the church, your pastor, your small group leader, etc. The selection of these wise counselors takes great wisdom because all counselors are not created equal. These counselors should primarily use the Bible, as Scripture is sufficient to train us in all righteousness. [Second Timothy 3:16-17](#) says this:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

God's Word is useful to train and equip us for every good work, which includes marriage. Those who



[Matthew 18](#). This is how Christ intended his church to function. Not only should we depend on God, but we should depend on one another. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you” ([1 Cor 12:21](#)). By not using the body, we spiritually impoverish ourselves. Independent couples may spend their entire marriage spiritually sick, or even worse, the marriage may end in divorce.

Who are your wise counselors who help you achieve victory? Have you and your mate considered this question? Are you willing to allow the church to be involved in your marriage as Christ desires?

In Conflict, We Must Immediately Seek Resolution

Another important principle that must be applied in marriage is to seek to resolve conflict as soon as possible. Both mates should agree to this principle early in the relationship. Paul said in

[Ephesians 4:26-27](#): “In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.”

Paul says to get rid of anger before the day is over, because if we don’t, it will give Satan a foothold. What does this mean? “Foothold” is war terminology. It means that unforgiveness and anger will give Satan a door to continually attack a person or a relationship.

We learn more about this from the Parable of the Merciless Servant in [Matthew 18:23-35](#). In this story, a servant owed his master a great amount of money, so he begged for mercy. The master forgave him the entire debt. However, this servant had a fellow servant who owed him a smaller debt. The servant with the debt pleaded for mercy, but the servant, who had been forgiven, instead threw him in prison. When the master heard about this, he became very angry and tossed the servant, whom he had previously forgiven, into prison to be tortured by the jailors. Listen to what Christ said to his disciples about this parable: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart” ([Matthew 18:35](#)).

Christ said to the disciples that if they didn’t forgive others from the heart, God would do the same to them. Who are these torturers? No doubt, they refer to Satan and his demons (cf. [1 Sam 16:14](#), [1 Cor 5:5](#), [1 Tim 1:20](#)). This is the consequence for harboring anger and unforgiveness towards others. If God has forgiven us of every sin we committed and will commit, how can we justifiably hold grudges against



For many couples, because of their disobedience to God in holding bitterness and anger, their marriage has become a playground for the enemy. He lies to them; he accuses them. He tempts them to go outside of the marriage, and he also may bring sickness and other types of consequences for their rebellion (cf. [Lk 13:11-16](#), [Job 2:4-7](#)).

To make this situation even worse, Scripture says when we are walking in unforgiveness, God will not forgive us ([Matt 6:15](#)) and he won't hear our prayers. Peter called for husbands to be considerate of their wives and to treat them with respect so that nothing would hinder their prayers ([1 Peter 3:7](#)). A marriage where the mates hold bitterness and anger towards one another is a marriage where prayer is powerless, which opens a greater door for the enemy to attack and bring destruction.

When in conflict, we must seek resolution immediately. Certainly, we can't force somebody to forgive us or to desire to work things out. However, we can do as much as possible to live at peace with someone.

[Romans 12:18](#) says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

Are you holding a grudge against your mate? How is God calling you to seek resolution?

In Conflict, We Must Be Willing to Sacrifice

Intrinsic to the Christian life is sacrifice. We follow a Savior who left heaven and all the worship offered to him there to come to earth as a servant and die for the sins of the world. True followers of Christ should be known by sacrifice. In fact, Christ said that one could not be his disciple without taking up his cross daily ([Lk 9:23](#)). This life of a sacrifice should be especially displayed when in conflict. Paul said this to the Philippian church who was struggling with an internal conflict (cf. [Phil 4:1-3](#)):

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

[Philippians 2:3-5](#)

In the context of a call to unity (cf. [Phil 2:1-2](#)), Paul said the Philippians should "do nothing out of selfish



preference?” Most conflicts are over selfish preferences instead of over something that genuinely matters, such as loving God and loving others, the two greatest commandments (cf. [Matt 22:36-40](#)).

Instead of being driven by self, Paul said to “in humility” consider others better than ourselves and to seek the interest of others. In conflict, one must ask, “How can I seek my spouse’s betterment or desires over mine?” Essentially, Paul was calling the Philippian church to live a life of sacrifice in order to be unified (v. 2). This sacrifice was further magnified when he said, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (v. 5). In the rest of the text, he described how Christ gave up his rights as God, took the form of a servant, died on the cross, and how God exalted him for his sacrifice (v. 6-9). This is the mind that should be in Christians, helping them to walk in unity with their brothers and sisters. And this is the mind that should be seen in every marriage, enabling them to walk in unity instead of discord (cf. [Eph 5:25](#)).

Christian couples should resolve their conflicts by caring more for their spouse’s desires than their own. They should humble themselves even as Christ did. He gave up his comfort and his rights to serve us.

How is God calling you to sacrifice in order to resolve conflict or a potential conflict in marriage? Is he calling you to give up a friendship that is a bad influence or causes discord? Is he calling you to help more around the house, to care more for the kids, to start participating in something your spouse enjoys but you don’t, to spend more time with your spouse instead of doing something else? How can you demonstrate Christ’s sacrifice in your marriage? Sacrifice is the secret to resolving conflict, while selfishness is the catalyst of conflict.

In Conflict, We Must Love Our Spouse Deeply and Cover His or Her Sins

Finally, when in conflict, we must love our spouse and cover his or her sins. [First Peter 4:8](#) says, “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.” The Greek word for “deeply” is an athletic word used of muscles stretching or straining.

This is a rich word-picture of our love during conflict. In the same way a muscle must be strained and stretched to develop and become stronger, God often strengthens our love through conflict and difficulty with our spouse. Even though this stretching hurts, it actually results in a greater capacity to love. Therefore, couples, who deeply love and cover one another’s sins while in conflict, gain the ability to love more deeply. Certainly, this must be an encouragement as we stretch our love to cover our spouse’s



Stretching our love will often mean overlooking and forgetting the failures of our spouse.

[First Corinthians 13:5](#) says love “keeps no record of wrongs.” God will call us to not even bring up some issues. While others, he will call us to firmly speak the truth in love ([Eph 4:15](#)) and work towards a resolution, especially when it involves sin.

How is God calling you to love your spouse deeply and cover his or her sins in order to resolve conflict?

Conclusion

Because sin became part of the human nature in the Fall, we are prone to conflict, even conflict with those we love most. For that reason, we must wisely prepare for conflict because it will happen in the marriage union. We can resolve conflict by:

1. Having the right attitude: one of joyful expectation, instead of wrong attitudes.
2. Developing perseverance instead of quitting physically or emotionally.
3. Sowing good seeds to produce a harvest of righteousness in our marriage.
4. Talking to our spouse first before talking with others.
5. Seeking wise counselors to help us navigate conflict.
6. Seeking to resolve conflict immediately to prevent opening a door for the devil.
7. Sacrificing our rights and desires for our spouse.
8. Loving our spouse deeply and covering his or her sin.

Conflict Resolution in Marriage Homework

Answer the questions, then discuss together.

1. What was new or stood out to you in this session? In what ways were you challenged or encouraged? Were there any points/thoughts that you did not agree with?
2. Most couples usually argue over similar topics. These are called “triggers”. This might be when the woman shops, the man watches TV, somebody doesn’t pick up after him or herself, etc.

Write down all the common triggers for arguments in your relationship. Why do you think these triggers commonly cause you or your mate to get angry?



etc.)? What about your spouse? How have you seen these negative seeds produce negative fruit? How can you sow positive seeds instead to reap positive fruit?

4. Solomon said in the multitude of advisers there is victory ([Prov 11:14](#)). Who would you talk to as a couple if you were having marital problems? If you were to choose a mentor couple for your marriage (someone to ask questions, to talk to about problems or successes, or even meet with regularly), who would you choose?

***Read the “Friends of the Opposite Sex?” article and answer the following questions:**

5. What are your thoughts about the Chaplain’s warning to the sailors about relationships with the opposite sex?

6. How will you handle relationships with the opposite sex? What specific things will you do in order to protect your marriage from open doors?

7. Do you have any other thoughts or concerns about this issue?

8. After completing this session, how do you feel God is calling you to pray for your marriage? Spend some time praying.

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