

How to Kill Relationships and Irritate People "Live with Unresolved Conflict"

Ephesians 4:25-27

Mark Vroegop

25 Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. 26 Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and give no opportunity to the devil (Eph 4:25-27).

We live in the midst of a culture that is perpetually filled with conflict. This week it was stunning to look at life through the lens of conflict and to realize how much conflict is a part of our life every day. Our world is characterized by conflict.

Now in the midst of this culture of sharp words, heated arguments, long-term silent treatments, and physical altercations Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God" (Matt 5:9). The contrast is huge! In the midst of this raging sea, Jesus calls for an island of peace. A place where "love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:7) – a place where "love never ends" (1 Cor 13:8).

We are in the middle of a series on relationships, and we learning how much the Bible says about how we are to conduct ourselves with people. Last week we looked at the subject of anger, and we discovered that "the anger of man doesn't produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). The week previous to that we learned that God resists the proud but He gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5:5). In other words if you want to kill relationships and irritate people just be full of yourself and use anger to get what you want.

Our world is filled with conflict, and the Bible calls followers of Jesus to be counter-cultural when it comes to conflict. Ken Sande, in his book *The Peacemaker*, describes the contrast this way:

Peacemakers are people who breathe grace. They draw continually on the goodness and power of Jesus Christ, and then they bring his love, mercy, forgiveness, strength, and wisdom to the conflicts of daily life. God delights to breathe his grace through peacemakers and use them to dissipate anger, improve understanding, promote justice, and encourage repentance and reconciliation.¹

¹ Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2004), 11.

Does that characterize you? Does it describe your family? Is there a relationship that you wish sounded more like that? Imagine with me what life could be like if you could learn how to have less conflict with people. And imagine what it would be like to be the kind of person who was able to work through difficulties in a profitable and God-honoring way. Imagine what it would be like to have relationships that are characterized by peace.

That is God's desire for those who know Jesus. He wants to show the world the powerful and practical difference that the gospel brings.

Three Relationship Commitments from Ephesians 4:

Ephesians 4 is all about the way that Jesus makes people new in a very practical manner. The apostle Paul calls believers to live in this new Jesus-centered reality:

"I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:1-3).

He calls believers to put on the "new self":

"... put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ...be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ...put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:22-24).

Verse 25 marks a transition in explaining how this new self, this new reality, this new calling should be expressed specifically in relationships. And there are three commitments that reflect this counter-culture life:

1. I must be honest (4:25)

It is very interesting here that Paul first identifies that central to good, God-honoring, and counter-cultural relationships is the importance of honesty or truth-telling. The command is fairly straight forward: 1) since you put away lying, 2) speak the truth with each other, 3) because we belong to each other. In other words, Jesus-centered relationships do not thrive in the absence of a basic commitment to truth-telling.

The first conflict between God and human beings began because of a lie. The devil, in Genesis 3, lied to Eve about the consequences and the payoff of the choice to disobey God's command not to eat of the tree. So the first sin committed and the first conflict between God and human beings was rooted in a departure from truth.

There is no real fellowship without a foundation of truth. Truth-telling is a key building block for God-honoring relationships, and the absence of truth creates conflict.

What makes fellowship possible is trust, mutual trust, mutual reliance, a feeling that you can trust one another, and therefore you can speak freely and openly, one to another. But the moment the element of lying comes in, fellowship is destroyed: you are no longer free; you do not know how much you can believe or what you can believe; you do not know how much you can trust the other person.²

Lying destroys fellowship. Dealing with conflict from a biblical perspective requires that you are committed to the truth. You must be willing to be honest about the problem, willing to lovingly share with a person what has hurt you, and willing to deal honestly with your own contribution to the problem. A lack of commitment to honesty will not create an environment for God-honoring relationships.

2. I must control my anger (4:26)

Ephesians 4:26 is a challenging passage. It is probably not commanding anger even though the translation could seem to indicate that. It is more likely that Paul is instructing us on how we are to respond when the emotions of anger develop inside of us. Thus the NIV translates verse 26 this way: "In your anger do not sin..."

We talked about this extensively last week so let me just review a few key points:

- It is possible for anger to not be sinful
- Righteous anger involves the following:
 - **Right Issue** – I need to be sure that I am angry about something that the Bible objectively defines as sinful
 - **Right Focus** – I need to be sure that I am angry because of the effects on God, his name, and his kingdom
 - **Right Expression** – I need to be sure that my expression of anger is not out of control or personally destructive but rather an emotional response that leads me to do the right thing

Dealing with anger is important because you will never be able to resolve conflict biblically or effectively if anger is not in check. Being counter-cultural, when it comes to conflict, will never happen without getting a hold on the issue of anger. Pride and anger must be in check for biblical conflict resolution to happen.

² Martin Lloyd-Jones. Darkness and Light, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1982), 223.

3. I must resolve issues quickly (4:27)

The final point is probably the most important for us to hear because it is the most common area in which conflict resolution breaks down: a failure to act decisively. In other words, most of the problem with conflict resolution is the unwillingness to do anything about it; doing nothing does something. To reinforce this point Paul says, "and give no opportunity to the devil" (v 27). There is a real sense that unresolved issues open the door for further, bigger problems.

Believers in Jesus should be motivated toward conflict resolution because we see life through a different lens. For instance, we understand the ultimate cause of sinful conflict.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel (James 4:1-2).

And we also understand the beauty and possibility of peace.

For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. 11 More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom 5:10-11).

Therefore, the Bible calls us to be bent toward action when it comes to dealing with conflict. Believers in Jesus, who understand the cause and ultimate solution to conflict, who have tasted the beauty of peace with God, should long for peace to reign in relationships with people. Peace is a main priority!

23 So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court (Matt 5:23-25).

The point of all these passages is that the followers of Jesus should hate the effects of sinful passions upon relationships. We should long for loving, God-glorifying, peace-filled relationships where conflicts are continually dealt with in a manner that brings joy to God and to us.

In fact if there was only one thing that I could get you to do as a result of this message today it would be this: to determine not to allow issues to fester. I would urge you to love peace, to love it for all the God-centered, Jesus-exalting reasons that the Bible gives us.

Through a commitment to the truth, to not be sinfully angry, and to resolve issues quickly, the stage is set for great conflict resolution and a great opportunity to demonstrate how the gospel really works. Think with me about what could happen if College Park was filled to overflowing with people who breathed out grace, whose relationships were not perfect but marked by a beautiful ability to bring resolution where there once was conflict.

What to do about conflict?

I hope that you are motivated to deal with conflicts, and that is why I want to spend some time talking very specifically and practically about some specific actions steps related to conflict.

1. See conflict as an opportunity

We've said a lot of bad things about conflict, but you need to know that not all conflict is either bad or sinful. Sometimes conflicts take place simply because of misunderstandings, a simple lack of communication, or different assumptions. At other times conflicts happen because of a difference in values, goals, interests, or opinions. You just see the world differently. Further, in a world of limited resources (e.g., time, money, energy) there is bound to be natural conflicts that will occur.³ The problem is not always the cause. The problem is usually what happens next.

And I would like for you to see conflict not as intrinsically bad but as an opportunity. 1 Corinthians 11:19 indicates that differences among people presented a spiritual opportunity: "No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval." The differences in the church led to conflict regarding the Lord's Table, and Paul says that the situation was an opportunity to demonstrate maturity or genuineness (ESV).

I want you to change what you see when you look at conflict. I want you to see it as an opportunity for you to grow, an opportunity for you to practice humility, an opportunity to help someone else grow, an opportunity to glorify God. No matter what happens you can always glorify God.

2. Choose to overlook the offense

Conflict is a natural part of a fallen world, and most of the time our practice should be to overlook the offense. Dealing with every conflict, every slight, or every offense is not practical or necessary. In fact, doing so can actually lead to more conflict!

Instead the Bible calls us to deal with minor offenses by overlooking them in love:

³ Sande, 30.

“Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense” (Prov 19:11).

“Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8)

“...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:2-3)

“...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. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col 3:13-14).

The overarching tone of our lives should be one of love toward others where we bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things (1 Cor 13:7). Overlooking an offense is more than just passively dealing with conflict by not saying anything about it. It is an active process which is inspired by God’s mercy through the gospel.⁴ It means that you treat the person as if they’ve never hurt you, as though you have forgiven them.

Now there are some conflicts that cannot and should not be covered in love. When an offense is dishonoring to God, repeatedly damages your relationship, hurts others, or is destructive to the offender something else must be done.

3. Confront with the goal of reconciliation

I have chosen my wording here very specifically. If the offense is such that it cannot or should not be overlooked, then the Bible clearly tells us that we have an obligation to try and rescue the person or the relationship. How do you do that?

- **Right Preparation**

It is very important that any confrontation event be predicated with personal examination. We need to ask ourselves some important questions:

- Is my attitude right?
- Do I know all the facts?
- Have I tried to see this from their vantage point?
- What has been my contribution to the problem?
- Is this the right time?
- What outcome would be right?

⁴ Sande, 151.

A failure to prepare means that you are really not interested in a solution; you just want to vent your frustrations

- **Right Process**⁵

Matthew 18:15-17 clearly tells us that there is an important process to follow. It begins with a one on one conversation the tone of which should be love, concern, and tentativeness. This step may happen repeatedly. If the person fails to listen others are brought into the equation in order to “establish by evidence” what is really going on. In other words, they are present to be sure that this issue is not just a misunderstanding. The final two steps involved telling it to the church body, and a potential removal from fellowship.

Several years ago I discovered a method called OIC that has helped diffuse defensive people.

Observe – share with them what you see. **Interpret** – give possible and tentative explanations for what happened. **Clarify** – allow the person to explain.

If I could give you three words that summarize they would be: lovingly, humbly, relentlessly. And please remember it is not your job to bring conviction! Only the Holy Spirit can (see 2 Timothy 2:25).

- **Right Response**

The final step is choosing the right response. If the person responds with repentance and seeks your forgiveness, it is important that you understand what real forgiveness is. Sande lists four promises that are made in granting someone forgiveness:

“I will not dwell on this incident”
“I will not bring this up again and use it against you”
“I will not talk to others about this”
“I will not let this stand between us”⁶

In the book, *Young Peacemaker*, they give a little poem to remember the four promises:

Good thought,
Hurt you not.
Gossip never,
Friends forever.⁷

⁵ For a more thorough treatment of the various ways to work through a confrontation in different and difficult situations (e.g., confronting an abuser), see chapters 7-9 in Sande’s book.

⁶ Sande, 209

⁷ Ibid

In other words, granting forgiveness means that you treat people as if they never hurt you. It means that while you may never be able to forget what happened, you make the choice to not hold it against the person. It means that you choose to release them from the debt that their actions created. And it means that you work to repair the relationship.

Let me tell you there is nothing sweeter than resolving conflicts God's way. And let me also tell you that there are few things more painful than relationships that are characterized by a lack of honesty, long-held anger, and years of unresolved conflict.

I want you to be free – not from conflict – but from the bondage of continually unresolved conflict. I want for your relationships to be characterized by a love that can only come from understanding the cross of Jesus.

I want you to be the kind of people who breathe grace. The kind of people who draw continually on the goodness and power of Jesus Christ, and then they bring his love, mercy, forgiveness, strength, and wisdom to the conflicts of daily life. God wants you to be like this. God delights to breathe his grace through peacemakers and use them to dissipate anger, improve understanding, promote justice, and encourage repentance and reconciliation.⁸

And my guess is, if you know Jesus, you want to be like this too!

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⁸ Sande, 11.