

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

PRODIGAL MESSAGE #6

Memory verse of the week:

John 13:34–35 ESV: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

*When I joined my current church—Watermark Community Church—years ago, I participated in an introductory class which was led by an elder who was a close, respected friend of mine. He said something in that class that really got my attention: “It helps me to remember that **conflict is an opportunity to glorify God.**” He then went on to explain that he carried with him, at all times, a Watermark handout which addresses how to deal with conflict biblically.¹ He kept a copy in his briefcase, in his car, in his desk at work, and in his desk at home. I initially thought that strange—that is, “overkill”—but out of respect for him, I took note of the importance which he placed upon it.*

Introduction: Conflict is an opportunity

Prodigal chaos causes conflict—conflict between you and your prodigal as well as conflict between family and friends *because of* their shared prodigal. No matter what the situation, addressing conflict in a biblical manner is an opportunity to glorify God, to become more like Christ, and to serve others well. If done properly, conflict resolution is a surprisingly effective tool for strengthening and deepening interpersonal relationships. But make no mistake—dealing with conflict is hard! And as a result, many people try to avoid it at all costs, which only fuels misunderstandings and often leads to damaged and broken relationships. It is imperative, however, that we are guided by Matthew 18—which outlines the appropriate manner for resolving conflict—and, thus, deal with conflict immediately and authentically. This process is empowered by a relationship with Jesus Christ and a focus on his work in our own lives. Therefore, we must view others as He views us (see Romans 5:7–11; Ephesians 4:32; 5:2).

He is our peace

Conflict is almost always caused by someone’s pride and selfishness. It is often further complicated by poor communication and misunderstanding. We must, therefore, approach situations of conflict as Christ calls us to—as forgiven servants who love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:37–40; Mark 12:30–31). We can truly love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves only when we realize that our identity is rooted in Christ and His love for us—not in our possessions, our reputations, or even our own power. Our identity is in Christ *alone*. Helpfully, our Personal Mission Statement (PMS) guides us by reminding us of who we are and what we are called to do (see also Matthew 5:43–44; John 13:34–35). Overall, therefore, successful biblical conflict resolution simply starts with **Jesus Christ**—“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one

¹ The handout, *Conflict: Our Constant Opportunity: Field Guide* (Watermark Community Church), can be accessed at <http://www.watermark.org/dallas/ministries/community/resources/conflict-field-guide>.

new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility” (Ephesians 2:14–16).

“The problem with most of us is that we want to start by clearing up only the results of conflict. God never starts there; He starts with the person. He says peace is a Person, and in order for you to live at peace with someone else, you must be at peace with the Person of Christ.”

– Ray Steadman²

Two or more individuals simply agreeing not to fight is *not* peace. Jesus did not avoid conflict but, instead, pointed out tough choices that people needed to make. He even pointed out people’s personal faults, which led to tremendous conflict (see, for example, Jesus and the rich young ruler [Matthew 19:16–22]; Jesus and the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes [Mark 11:27–12:34]; Jesus and the Samaritan woman [John 4:7–26]). For those individuals who work through conflict wisely and carefully, they experience genuine, satisfying, and enduring *peace*. If you are in a right relationship with Christ, then you should be able to work through any conflict in an optimal, God-honoring manner. For example, no marriage should end in divorce if both parties are equally yoked as believers and are fully devoted to Christ and His commandments. This may seem like an overstatement, but it bears restating: *It is our human selfishness and pride that negatively impact relationships, but it is the power of Christ Jesus to provide peace in the midst of conflict.*

Check your motives

With your Personal Mission Statement in mind, your motive in any conflict should be to achieve **reconciliation**—it cannot be for revenge, to prove your own point, or to prove that you are right. These improper motives are driven by pride and selfishness and not by God’s desire that you love both your neighbor and your enemies. The following Scriptures help solidify this point:

- Romans 12:18–19: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God...”
- Hebrews 12:14–15: “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.”
- 1 Peter 4:8: “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.”

The source(s) of conflict

In order to work through conflict effectively, it is very helpful to identify the root cause of the issue at hand. James 4:1–4 powerfully speaks of this source: “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. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not

² Ray Stedman, “He Is Our Peace: A Daily Devotion for March 8th,” Ray Stedman Ministries, 2006, <https://www.raystedman.org/daily-devotions/ephesians/he-is-our-peace>.

receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your *passions*. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”

Our own desires, selfishness, and pride are the source of conflict—in other words, **idolatry**. If we have idols in our lives, conflict results when people tread on those idols. Therefore, we must identify the idols in our own lives which cause conflict and then eliminate them. *God* is the only one in life whom we should worship—not other *things* (see Exodus 20:1–6; Habakkuk 2:18–20; Matthew 6:24). If we can maintain this proper perspective and minimize the root causes of conflict, then we will be amazed by how diminished conflict is in our lives. On the other hand, however, if we place money, respect, control, and love of the world above love for God, then conflict is more likely to occur! It is imperative, therefore, that we rightly deal with the sources of conflict in our own lives.

Get the log out of your own eye

We have learned in other Prodigal lessons that you can only control *yourself*. So, a good place to start in any conflict is to look honestly at yourself. As Jesus says in Matthew 7:1–5, “Judge not, that you be not judged. . . . Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? . . . You hypocrite, 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.” Ask yourself, therefore, if there are any issues that you need to own in a particular conflict. If so, then you should deal with them *first*—without regard for whether the other individual has dealt with their issues. Furthermore, community can play a valuable part in your self-analysis, as it creates a space in which you can be sharpened before conflict resolution even begins.

If you do have issues that you need to own, then acknowledge and accept the following key points—we call them the seven “A’s”:

- **Address** everyone involved
- **Avoid** excuses
- **Admit** specifics
- **Apologize** sincerely
- **Accept** the consequences
- **Ask** for forgiveness
- **Alter** your behavior

When giving an apology, it is most common to say, “I’m sorry.” While that statement might be *helpful*, it is not *enough*. It’s more effective to ask for forgiveness. This is the humblest approach, as it sends a powerful message to those whom you are in conflict with that you are seeking *reconciliation* and not merely wanting this conflict to *go away*. Conflict needs to be fully resolved in order to—ideally—result in reconciliation. And humble acknowledgment of your own issues is a great way to begin the process.

What issues are worth addressing?

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

So, which offenses do we overlook? Which ones should we address? How can we know?! Well, if we allow Matthew 22:37–40 (the two greatest commandments) to guide us in this process, then we might ask four questions in response to any issue so that we can love God and love our neighbor in a God-honoring manner. If the answer to any of the following questions is “yes,” then that issue is one that needs to be addressed—immediately and authentically.

- Is it hurting the individual with whom I am in conflict?
- Is it hurting others outside of this conflict?
- Is it damaging relationships—the one in question or others?
- Is it dishonoring God?

Biblical conflict resolution

The mechanics of conflict resolution are clearly articulated in Matthew 18:15–17:

1. Speak face to face, one on one. Admit your own part and tell the other party of their fault—but with patience, gentleness, and love (verse 15; see also Galatians 6:1).
2. If #1 fails, then take someone with you in order to enhance accountability and wise counsel (verse 16).
3. If #1 and #2 fail, then widen your circle and bring the conflict before your local church body (verse 17a).

If this three-fold approach fails to resolve the conflict and the other party refuses to submit to the biblical wisdom and authority the elders/church, then you treat them as a non-believer (verse 17b). Although this may seem harsh, realize that this is a lengthy, detailed process that gives the offending party ample opportunity to repent. And keep in mind that if *you* are the offending party, then *you* are held to those same standards. Also, remember how we should treat non-believers—we don’t hate them but continually **love** them, and we don’t reject them but simply call them to **repentance** and **reconciliation**. Furthermore, you don’t divorce your spouse, disown your child, or dismiss your friend; instead, in the above manner, you simply love them and call them to repentance. Finally, always be willing to revisit the issue and pursue biblical conflict resolution if acceptance of fault and repentance occurs. Wouldn’t you want that kind of response if *you* were the one in the wrong?

Conclusion: Finish well

If conflict has been resolved, then finish well. Closure will only occur through true forgiveness; we must not dwell on the incident. We must also control our tongue by not talking to others about it unnecessarily—that is, beyond the scope of conflict resolution outlined above. If we have resolved the conflict in an open, honest, and sincere manner, then the incident should not stand in the way of a future relationship. In fact, if done well, the experience should strengthen the relationship!

If conflict is unresolved due to the other party’s unwillingness to heed wise counsel, then realize that you are not responsible for the outcome (Proverbs 12:15; 19:25; 21:31; see also Ezekiel 33:1–10). You are only responsible for participating in the process wisely and diligently. We should navigate the ebb and flow of conflict just as we should navigate every aspect of our lives—**by abiding in Christ**. If we attempt to

accomplish anything apart from Christ, then our efforts will not bear fruit, for apart from Christ we can do nothing (John 15:4–5).

Our dependence on Him is never more evident than when we endeavor to resolve conflict biblically—in a manner that restores relationships and glorifies God.

In the years since joining the church, I have strived to live more and more in authentic, honest, and open community. I have learned that it is almost impossible to “sharpen” each other with truth without “sparks flying”—in other words, conflict is unavoidable if we live life closely and openly with one another. I have also served in leadership for the church’s community team for several years and have helped to arbitrate conflict on a regular basis. And I have now come to see the incredible power and value of dealing with conflict when it manifests quickly, directly, and biblically.

What’s more, I now keep a copy of that conflict field guide—the one that my friend mentioned and kept all over the place—with me almost all the time. In fact, we at the Prodigal Ministry have found that conflict handout to be so valuable that we give it to every person who visits Prodigal.

CLOSED GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Day 1

Describe a time when you did not handle conflict well. Also, describe a time when you handled conflict appropriately and biblically.

Day 2

This message describes resolving conflict as an opportunity to glorify God. Explain how you can glorify God in conflict. Give specific examples.

Day 3

This message states that successful biblical conflict resolution must begin with Jesus Christ. How would you apply that principle in your life when dealing with conflict appropriately and biblically? Give specific examples.

Day 4

Explain why motives are important to understand when dealing with conflict and how they impact the process and outcome of conflict resolution.

Day 5

How do you judge whether an issue should be dealt with or overlooked? What might be some obstacles to navigating well this aspect of conflict resolution?

Day 6

Explain the Matthew 18 process of walking through conflict. Be sure to include how you treat non-believers.

NOTES