

Handling Conflict Biblically

Gently Restore

Adapted from The Peacemaker by Ken Sande, Chapters 7-9¹

Review: The Four “G’s” of Peacemaking

- **The Slippery Slope of Conflict**
 - One’s approach to conflict generally falls into one of three categories:
 - Escape (Peace-Faking)
 - Attack (Peace-Breaking)
 - Peace-Making
 - Peacemaking responses are further categorized as **personal** and **assisted**.
 - Personal peacemaking responses may feel more “costly” upfront (humility, willingness to extend forgiveness, etc.), but typically reap lasting dividend and preserve the relationship.
 - One’s attitude toward conflict can reframe one’s approach.
 - Our aim: See conflict as a way to glorify God and benefit all parties involved.
- **Conflict Defined:** A difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone’s goals or desires.
 - Not all conflict is bad or inherently sinful.
 - Some conflict will naturally arise anytime lies are confronted with truth.
 - Much conflict is caused by sinful heart conditions that are manifested through hurtful words, actions, and attitudes.
- **The Four “G’s” of Peacemaking:**
 - Glorify God
 - *How can I please and honor God in this situation?*
 - Get the Log Out of Your Eye
 - *How can I show Jesus’ work in me by taking responsibility for my contribution to this conflict?*

¹ Sande, Ken. 2004. *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*. Baker Books.

- Gently Restore
 - *How can I lovingly serve others by helping them take responsibility for their contribution to this conflict?*
- Go and Be Reconciled
 - *How can I demonstrate the forgiveness of God and encourage a reasonable solution to this conflict?*

Just Between the Two of You

- **Restoring Means More Than Confronting**
 - One of the most challenging ways we serve others in conflict is to help them see where they have been wrong and need to change.
 - **Matthew 18:15** *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.*
 - At first glance, one may assume that the only way to address a concern is with direct confrontation. However, in context, it appears Jesus has something much more beneficial in view than simply listing the sins of another.
 - Matthew 18:12-14 is the account of the shepherd who lovingly pursues the wayward sheep, with much rejoicing when it is found. Matthew 18:15 is introduced on the heels of this theme of joyful restoration, not condemnation.
 - Matthew 18:21-35 is the parable of the unmerciful servant, purposed to remind us that we ought to be as merciful and forgiving to others as God is to us.
 - The context is a loving and redemptive attitude rather than mere confrontation. The goal is loving restoration.
 - There are a variety of approaches Scripture gives to address sin:
 - Teaching (2 Timothy 2:24)
 - Instructing (Romans 15:4)
 - Reasoning (Acts 17:17)
 - Encouraging/Exhorting (2 Timothy 4:2)
 - Correcting (Galatians 6:1)
 - Warning (1 Corinthians 4:14)
 - Admonishing (1 Thessalonians 5:14)
 - Rebuking (Luke 17:3)
 - The method and intensity of our communication should fit the needs of the individual and the occasion. (See 1 Timothy 5:1; Titus 1:13)

- Scripture includes indirect methods alongside direct methods as effective tools for communication:
 - The woman at the well (John 4:1-18)
 - Jesus' parables (Matthew 21:33-45; Luke 15)
 - Paul's approach with the Athenians (Acts 17:22-31)
- **Face-to-Face, or Indirect?**
 - Just as Scripture provides a spectrum of approaches in identifying sin, it also includes examples of indirect methods for bringing reconciliation.
 - While speaking personally and privately with someone who's offended us is of course in view in Matthew 18:15-20, certain situations may allow for indirect initial methods of reconciliation:
 - Before Jacob met Esau in person, he sent servants with gifts to encourage a friendly encounter (Genesis 32-33).
 - Joseph's brothers sent someone to speak on their behalf when they feared Joseph may take revenge on them (Genesis 50:15-16).
 - Abigail intervened between her husband, Nabal, and David; she was commended for her wisdom (1 Samuel 25:18-35).
 - Barnabas spoke on Paul's behalf to the apostles who were concerned about meeting him (Acts 9:26-27).
 - While personal conversations are often the best first step, sometimes involving other people sooner in the process may be better.
 - In some cultures/traditions, it's customary to resolve problems through intermediaries and/or representatives.
 - Differences in language levels or other causes for intimidation may warrant involving others.
 - When one party was abused by the other, it's often best to involve another trusted intermediary or authority figure to handle the reconciliation process.
 - When a third party has a closer relationship with the one who's caught in sin, having the third party raise the concern may be better received.
 - With those considerations in mind, a face-to-face meeting is usually essential to genuine reconciliation where confession and forgiveness can be offered.
- **If Someone Has Something Against You**
 - When you discover someone has something against you, God wants *you* to take the initiative in seeking peace.
 - Often we think if we've done nothing wrong we don't bear such a responsibility, but Jesus's teaching in Matthew 5:23-24 implies the opposite:

- **Matthew 5:23-24** *So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*
- This command isn't limited by *justifiable* matters; rather, reconciliation is to be pursued whether the complaint is legitimate or not.
- Reasons we should initiate reconciliation, even if we don't believe we're at fault, include:
 - Jesus commands it.
 - Seeking peace with an alienated brother increases our witness (See Luke 6:32-36).
 - Your conscience will be clearer, and you'll have greater peace if you've faced any complaints someone has against you.
 - Initiating reconciliation is an expression of love for our brother and concern for his wellbeing. Unresolved bitterness, anger, and unforgiveness are sins, and it doesn't do the other party good to dwell in those sinful emotions. Whether they have a genuine complaint or not, their persistence in these feelings will be like acid to their soul.
- Although we can't ultimately force someone to change their mind about us, through our own confession of fault and/or demonstrating that a complaint is without basis, we should make every effort to live at peace by clearing up misunderstandings.
 - **Romans 12:18** *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*
 - **Hebrews 12:14** *Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.*
- **When Someone's Sins are Too Serious to Overlook**
 - It's often difficult to decide if a sin can simply be overlooked or if it should be addressed.
 - Below are some considerations for assessment:
 - **Is it dishonoring God?** If a behavior is causing others to think less of God, his church, or His Word, it may be necessary to urge a change in behavior. This doesn't mean we should call attention to every minor offense, but when a behavior or pattern affects the person's or church's witness, it should be addressed.
 - **Note:** One's level of authority and/or activity in the church may increase the speed with which a sin is addressed. While all sin is detestable to the Lord, sin splatters further as one's influence has greater reach.

- **Is it damaging your relationship?** If you're unable to forgive an offense, it's probably too significant to overlook. Don't allow frustration and resentment to build.
- **Is it hurting others?** If a matter results in serious harm to you or others, it should be addressed. The offender may be imperiling others directly (hurtful words, harmful behaviors, etc.), or indirectly (child abuse, drunk driving, setting a poor example, etc.).
 - Biblical principle: A little yeast leavens the whole dough (1 Corinthians 5:6).
- **Is it hurting the offender?** Sin should be addressed when it is seriously harming the offender, either directly (like alcohol abuse) or by impairing their relationship with God and others. We should not buy in to the worldview that each should be left to do their "own thing"; we are called in Scripture to watch over one another with brotherly love (Hebrews 3:12-13; Romans 12:10) with active intentionality.
 - **James 5:19-20** *My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*
- What about turning the other cheek?
 - **Matthew 5:39** *But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*
 - Some mistakenly apply this verse to mean correcting others who offend us is forbidden.
 - This verse is not prescribing a pattern for resolving conflict or addressing sin in the church. This passage (along with others like it, including 1 Peter 1:6-7 and 1 Peter 4:12-19) provides instruction on how we are to respond when enduring personal injury as a result of our witness. We should not respond with retaliation and vengeance.
- **What If the Other Party Doesn't Respond Well?**
 - We should not try to talk to others about their wrongs until we've taken the log out of our own eye (Matthew 7:3-5).
 - Often, our confession will encourage others to admit to sins as well. Sometimes, the other party will not acknowledge their faults, or will do so incompletely. What should we do in this case?
 - **Simply overlook the offense.**
 - **Build on the other's superficial confession.**
 - **You may need to talk about the other person's sin now, irrespective their views on it.**
 - **You may postpone the confrontation until another time.**

Speak the Truth in Love

- Our words can promote understanding and encourage agreement or they can aggravate conflict and drive people apart.
 - **Ephesians 4:15-16** *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*
- Below are some foundational principles and skills for using our words in a way that promotes unity, reconciliation, and conflict resolution.
 - **Bring Hope through the Gospel.** Instead of coming at people with the law, bring the power of the gospel to bear. Consider Jesus's example with the woman at the well and Paul's example in his letters: The foundation for real change and hope is the power of Jesus. Keeping Him (and our standing in Him) front and center is key. We must address failures, but not dwell on them.
 - For example, imagine you are talking to someone about their pattern of gossip this way: "I don't think you deliberately set out to hurt Bill, but your words may have damaged his reputation. The good news is that Jesus died to deliver you, me, Bill – all of us – from our sins. God has given us a warning and a promise: If we conceal our wrongs, he will continue to discipline us until we repent, but if we confess our sins, he will forgive us and restore us! If you ask for his help and deal with this the way he teaches, the whole incident can be wiped away."
 - **Be Quick to Listen.** Good listening is an important skill for a peacemaker, as it improves your ability to understand others, shows you realize you may not have all the information or answers, and tells the other person you value their thoughts and opinions. This doesn't mean you must agree with what another is saying, but it does engender an atmosphere of respect.
 - **James 1:19** *Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.*
 - **Proverbs 18:13** *If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.*
 - **Listening Skills:**
 - **Waiting** – Try not to jump to premature conclusions, and don't interrupt others when they're speaking. Learn to be comfortable with silence, and don't respond the moment there's a pause. Don't try to offer immediate solutions to every problem that's offered to you.
 - **Attending** – The mind can often drift elsewhere or ahead in a conversation. Do your best to be cognizant of eye contact, negative body language, and minimize distractions. Nod in

agreement when appropriate, and lean forward to show interest. Demonstrate that you're actively listening.

- **Clarifying** – This is the process of ensuring you understand what the other person is saying. Asking clarifying questions shows you're interested in learning, but try not to be defensive.
- **Reflecting** – This is the process of paraphrasing and/or summarizing the other person's main points in your own words, and sending them back in a constructive way. Reflecting deals with both the conflict and the feelings; this does not require agreement, but reveals your comprehension.
 - “You believe that I didn’t take the time to hear you out.”
 - “From your perspective, I was wrong when I said that about you.”
 - “The situation has created problems for you and your family.”
 - “You feel I’ve been dishonest in...”
- **Agreeing** – This is the process of acknowledging what you know to be true before addressing points of disagreement. This encourages the other party to speak more openly and avoids unnecessary repetition. This is especially powerful when you have, in fact, been in the wrong.
 - This process requires listening for the truth, resisting the temptation to defend or cast blame, and resisting the temptation to focus on other points of disagreement.
 - Ask yourself, “Is there any truth to what this person is saying?” If so, acknowledge what is true and identify the common ground before moving to differences.
 - **Psalm 141:5** *Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let my head not refuse it. Yet my prayer is continually against their evil deeds.*
 - **Proverbs 15:31** *The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise.*
 - One reason we're hesitant to agree is we fear it implies we're accepting responsibility for the entire problem (which may not be correct). To overcome this, be thoughtfully specific with your agreement.
 - Such responses require humility and keeping a tight rein on our emotions.

- **The Tongue of the Wise Brings Healing**

- Speak to others in a clear, constructive, and persuasive manner.
 - **Proverbs 12:18** *There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*
- **Breathe Grace.** We ourselves must be filled with the Spirit and full of gospel hope if we are to breathe that into others through our words.
- **Make Charitable Judgements.** When others sense that you're trying to believe the best about them, they will be more inclined to listen to your concerns. (1 Corinthians 13:7)
- **Speak the Truth in Love.** We must ask God to put love in our hearts that's not naturally there (1 Corinthians 13:1-7) and to help us communicate with gentleness and patience, showing we care for their wellbeing (Galatians 6:1; Philippians 2:3-4; Ephesians 4:15-16).
- **Talk from Beside, Not from Above.** Try not to speak to people as though they are inferior to you; admit your own weaknesses and how you've experienced forgiveness and restoration. This helps others see that there's hope for them, too!
- **Help Others Examine the Desires of Their Hearts.** The root cause of most conflict is desires in our heart that have become so strong that they begin to consume and control us. Reconciliation will be elusive until such misplaced desires are exposed. Use passages like James 4:1-3 and Matthew 5:19 to steer the conversation toward matters of the heart.
- **Choose the Right Time and Place.** Timing is an important ingredient of effective communication. If possible, try not to discuss sensitive matters with someone who is tired, worried about other things, or in a bad mood. Furthermore, ensure you have enough time in a setting to discuss the matter thoroughly. Likewise, choose the right place; the wrong location and audience can disrupt the peacemaking process.
- **Talk in Person Whenever Possible.** Communication is most effective when it's done personally. Face-to-face conversation is usually better than talking by telephone, text message, or other means since facial expressions, body language, and cues on both sides are best discerned in person.
- **Engage Rather than Declare.** Instead of abruptly announcing what someone has done wrong, think carefully about how to open the conversation such that engagement in discussion is not derailed by defensiveness. The approach will vary by relational connection; close friends may be easier to address more directly while acquaintances may require more trust-building and connection. Consider using metaphors and analogies to drive home points and carry the conversation.

- **Communicate So Clearly That You Cannot Be Misunderstood.** Many conflicts arise from aggravated misunderstandings. Don't merely communicate so that you *are* understood, communicate so clearly that you *cannot be misunderstood*.
- **Plan Your Words.** When talking to others about their faults, it's worth the time to prepare well by writing out issues that need to be addressed, considering what ought to be avoided, evaluating metaphors and analogies that the other person will understand, and detailing how specific behaviors and/or words have affected you and/or others. It's also worthwhile to plan for various scenarios that may arise, including how you may be able to give a "gentle answer that turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1) in the case of an angry response.
- **Use "I" Statements.** Using "I" statements gives information about yourself rather than attacking the other person.
 - Consider this formula: **I feel ____ when you ____, because ____.** As a result, ____.
 - Instead of "You are insensitive and rude", use: "I feel hurt when you make fun of me in front of other people, because it makes me feel stupid and foolish. As a result, I'm getting reluctant to go places with you when others may be around."
 - Such statements tell the other person the effects of their conduct, help to reduce defensiveness, clearly defines concerns, and communicates the weight of the offense.
- **Be Objective.** While sharing feelings may be helpful, if you emphasize subjective opinions and judgments too much, you are likely to communicate condescension or condemnation. Use facts whenever you can, and be sure not to exaggerate.
- **Use the Bible Carefully.** When using the Bible in conflict resolution, consider the following:
 - **Keep Ephesians 4:29 in mind.** Use the Bible to build up, not tear down.
 - **Make sure you're using the passage for its intended purpose.** Don't pull a verse out of context.
 - **Encourage others to read for themselves.** As you're able, encourage them to read a passage, and ask them how they think it applies.
 - **Know when to stop.** Sometimes repeated references can cause people to shut down if they don't have time to respond and process.

- **Ask for Feedback.** Since you're trying to match impact with intent, it may be helpful to ask clarifying questions along the way. For example: "Have I confused you?" "Have I explained this clearly enough?"
- **Offer Solutions and Preferences.** Be prepared to offer solutions to the problems you've identified; if you show someone a reasonable way out of a predicament, he or she may be more inclined to listen. At the same time, try not to give the impression that you have *all* the answers; make it clear that your suggestions are a starting point.
 - One way to achieve this is by stating things as a preference; for example: "I would prefer to renegotiate the contract rather than abandon it, but I'm open to suggestions. What would you prefer?"
- **Recognize Your Limits.** Remember that there are limits to what you can accomplish. You can raise concerns, suggest solutions, and encourage reasonableness, but you cannot force change. Only God can bring repentance and heart change.
 - **2 Timothy 2:24-26** *And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.*
 - Our aim is faithfulness; if we're faithful with prayerful preparation, sharing the truth in love, and effective communication, we can trust God with the results. (See Acts 20:26-27).