

Handling Conflict Biblically

Go and Be Reconciled

Adapted from The Peacemaker by Ken Sande, Chapters 10-12¹

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?*

Forgive as God Forgave You

- **You Cannot Do It Alone**

- Christians are the most forgiven people in the world, therefore we should be the most forgiving.
- It's often difficult to forgive others genuinely and completely; often our approach to forgiveness is some version of, "I forgive you, but I can't be close to you again."
- Imagine if God chose to "forgive" us this way; thankfully his forgiveness is complete and genuine!
- There's a relationship between our forgiveness and God's forgiveness:
 - ***Ephesians 4:32*** *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*
 - ***Colossians 3:13b*** *...if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*
- It's impossible to forgive the way God forgave us in our own strength.
 - It's easy to hide our feelings and force a smile when we see someone, but unless our heart is changed and cleansed, the memories and feelings will lurk in the background, poisoning our thoughts and words, and erecting barriers.
 - We must admit from the beginning that we cannot forgive in our own strength, and are desperate for help from God.
 - It's only by receiving His grace that we can extend His grace.

- **What Forgiveness is Not**

- Forgiveness is not merely a **feeling**.
 - Many times, forgiveness is reduced to an emotion. Instead, forgiveness is an act of the will.
 - Forgiveness is a product of a series of decisions, irrespective how one feels about them:
 - Calling upon God to change our hearts
 - Choosing not to think about or talk about how we've been hurt

- Forgiveness is not merely **forgetting**.
 - Forgetting is passive, wherein the passage of time causes matters in our mind to fade in intensity and severity.
 - Forgiving is an active process, involving a deliberate course of action. In Isaiah 43:25 when God says he “remembers your sins no more,” he is not saying he *cannot* remember them, but rather he *will not* remember them and hold them against you.
- Forgiveness is not **excusing**.
 - When we excuse something, we say “that’s okay” and imply “what you did to me wasn’t really wrong.”
 - In fact, when forgiveness is needed, that means there as a wrong committed that must be addressed.
 - Forgiveness acknowledges and deals honestly with sin such that the grace of God can be applied to cover it.
- **What Is Forgiveness?**
 - **Forgiveness is a Decision**
 - To forgive someone is to release him or her from liability to suffer punishment or penalty.
 - *Aphiemi* – Greek word often translated as “forgive”. Means to let go, release, or remit. It’s often used to refer to debts that have been paid or canceled in full. (Matthew 6:12; Matthew 18:27; Matthew 18:32).
 - *Charizomai* – Greek word also used for “forgive”. Means to bestow favor freely or unconditionally. This word shows that forgiveness is undeserved and cannot be earned. (Luke 7:42-43; 2 Corinthians 2:7-10; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13).
 - When someone sins, they create a debt, and someone must pay it.
 - Most of this debt is owed to God, and in His great mercy, he sent Jesus to pay that debt on the cross for all who trust in Him (Isaiah 53:4-6; 1 Peter 2:24-25; Colossians 1:19-20).
 - When someone sins against you, some of that debt is owed to you. You have a choice:
 - **Take** payments – Take from the offender by withholding forgiveness, dwelling on the wrong, being cold or aloof, giving up the relationship, inflicting emotional pain, gossiping, lashing out, or seeking revenge. These actions may provide a momentary pleasure, but as someone once said, “Unforgiveness is the poison we drink hoping others will die.”

- **Make** payments – Make a payment on the debt yourself and thereby release others from penalties they deserve to pay. Sometimes God will help you do this is one payment, choosing to forgive, and by God’s grace the debt is quickly and fully canceled in your heart and mind. When a hurt is deep, it may take more time, bearing certain effects over a long period, including fighting painful memories, speaking graciously when you want to inflict hurt, or even enduring physical and/or material consequences of an injury that a person is unable or unwilling to repair.
 - Forgiveness can be very costly, but if you believe in Jesus, you have more than enough to make these payments. When God forgives us, he releases us from the penalty of death and the penalty of eternal separation, and promises to not hold them against us.
 - **Jeremiah 31:34** ... *For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.*
 - **Psalms 103:12** ...*as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us*
 - **Psalms 130:3-4** *If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? ⁴ But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.*
 - God tears down barriers our sin has built, and opens a way for restored relationship. This is exactly what we must do if we’re to forgive as the Lord forgives us: releasing the person from the penalty of being separated from us, not holding their wrongs against them, and not punishing them.
- **Forgiveness is a decision to make four promises:**
 - I will not dwell on this incident.
 - I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you.
 - I will not talk to others about this incident.
 - I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.
- **When Should You Forgive?**
 - Ideally, repentance should precede forgiveness (Luke 17:3).
 - However, minor offenses can be overlooked even when there’s no expressed repentance.
 - In other cases, forgiveness should follow a two-staged process:
 - **Have an attitude of forgiveness.**
 - Unconditional
 - Commitment made to God (see Mark 11:25, Luke 6:38, Acts 7:60)

- Embrace a loving and merciful attitude toward someone who offended you.
 - This requires living out the “first promise” of not dwelling on the incident or seeking vengeance/retribution.
 - Instead, you pray for the person and stand ready to pursue reconciliation as soon as repentance comes.
- **Granting forgiveness.**
 - This is conditioned on the repentance of the offender; restored relationship cannot be extended if the offending party is unwilling to request it.
 - You can make the other three promises of forgiveness only to a repentant party.
- **Can You Mention the Sin Again?**
 - The four promises are a human device for remembering the acts involved in forgiveness, but as such, are limited and imperfect.
 - Thus, such frameworks cannot be held rigidly, as each situation requires wisdom and nuance.
 - Specifically, the commitment to not bring up a sin again shouldn’t be used to prevent dealing honestly and realistically with a pattern of recurring sin.
 - For the sake of a brother or sister who continues to sin a particular way, you may need to bring up past sin to reveal a pattern. In this case, you’re not breaking the second promise because you’re not bringing up a past sin to use it against the other, but to help them.
- **What About Consequences?**
 - Forgiveness does not automatically release a wrongdoer from all of sin’s consequences.
 - Examples:
 - Israelites prohibited from entering the promised land (Numbers 14:30-23)
 - David endured consequences for his adultery (2 Samuel 12:11-14; 13:1-39; 16:21-11; 19:1-4).
 - In these examples, God wasn’t unmerciful; he was quick to remove the penalty of separation and spares his people from many of their sin’s consequences. However, he sometimes allows consequences to remain to teach us to not sin again.
 - In the case of wrongs committed against us, merciful forgiveness may sometimes involve releasing someone from the consequences of their sins.
 - i.e. if someone negligently damages your car but is unable to bear the cost, you can offer to bear it yourself.

- But there may be times when you forgive but cannot afford to absorb the consequences of their wrongdoing.
- Other times, even if you *can* afford to cover the cost, it may not be wise to.
 - **Proverbs 19:19** *A man of great wrath will pay the penalty, for if you deliver him, you will only have to do it again.*
 - i.e. a careless teenager may drive more safely in the future if he/she is made to pay for damages incurred by an at-fault accident.
- **Overcoming Unforgiveness**
 - The promises of forgiveness can be hard to make and keep. God promises to help us forgive others, as he forgave us.
 - Below are some principles for overcoming unforgiveness in our hearts.
 - **Confirm Repentance.**
 - It may be wise to explain to a person who's wronged you why you're having a difficult time forgiving, as they may not have confessed clearly and specifically in such a way that demonstrates genuine repentance.
 - In such cases, a good first step is to kindly help someone see how their confession may have been deficient.
 - **Renounce Sinful Attitudes and Expectations.**
 - Forgiveness can be hindered by sinful attitudes and unrealistic expectations.
 - Many of us withhold forgiveness because we believe the offender must earn or deserve our forgiveness because we want to punish others and make them suffer.
 - Sometimes, we withhold forgiveness because we want to guarantee such an offense will never happen again.
 - These expectations are completely inconsistent with how God forgave us. There's no way we can deserve or earn God's forgiveness, and he doesn't withhold forgiveness to punish us!
 - God's forgiveness was given in Christ as a free gift (Romans 6:23), and he promises to forgive and cleanse all who are truly repentant (1 John 1:9).
 - God also does not demand guarantees regarding our further conduct, as evidenced by Jesus's command in Luke 17:3-5:
 - **Luke 17:3-5** *Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."* ⁵ *The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"*
 - We cannot allow our fears of the future prevent us from extending forgiveness today.

- **Assess Your Contribution to the Problem.**
 - Sometimes, your sin may have contributed to the problem.
 - Even if you didn't begin the dispute, it may be that your responses, actions, careless words, impatience, or other reactions may have aggravated the situation.
 - It's easy to act as though the other person's sins have more than canceled your wrongdoing, but such a self-righteous attitude can slow the forgiveness and reconciliation process.
 - Remembering your faults usually makes it easier to forgive others for theirs.
- **Recognize that God is Working for Good.**
 - When you've been wronged, it's helpful to remember God's lovingkindness and sovereignty.
 - Try to take note of how God is using the conflict for good, both in your life and the life of the other.
 - How can you serve others to help them grow in faith? What sins and weaknesses are being exposed? What character qualities are you being challenged to exercise? When you see how the person who has wronged you is being used as an instrument in God's hand to mature you, it may be easier for you to move forward in forgiveness.
- **Remember God's Forgiveness.**
 - When overcoming unforgiveness, one of the most important steps is to focus your attention on how much God has forgiven you.
 - The parable of the unmerciful servant illustrates this principle and shows the hypocrisy of receiving forgiveness from God while withholding forgiveness from others (Matthew 18:21-35).
 - The more you understand and appreciate how much *you've* been forgiven, the more you're able to extend forgiveness to others.
 - Remember Psalm 103:8-11:
 - **Psalm 103:8-11** *The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹ He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. ¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him...*
- **Draw on God's Strength**
 - You must remember that true forgiveness depends on God's grace.
 - You must ask God to change your heart to help you forgive when you are at the end of your ability to do so.

- The Lord gives the grace to obey the command to forgive in the act of extending the forgiveness.
- Consider the story of Corrie ten Boom.

- **Reconciliation and the Replacement Principle**

- Forgiveness is an event and a process; making the “four promises” of forgiveness is an event that tears down the wall that stands between you and the person who offended you, but you still will need to clear away debris and do repair work.
- This process is called *reconciliation*, a change in attitude that leads to a change in relationship. Specifically, it means to replace hostility and separation with peace and friendship. This is what Jesus had in mind when he said “Go and be reconciled to your brother” in Matthew 5:24.
- **Note:** Being reconciled does not mean the person who offended you must become your closest friend, but your relationship should be at least as good as it was before the offense occurred.
- Reconciliation involves granting the repentant person an opportunity to demonstrate repentance and regain your trust. This can be slow and difficult, especially if the person stumbles along the way and when there’s been a pattern of offense, but persistence in the cost of reconciliation is worth the outcome.
- Reconciliation should be pursued in three levels:
 - **In Thought** – We have to fight painful memories coming back to the surface. The *replacement principle* is the idea that instead of simply trying to think less of an unpleasant experience, we should strive to think of what is “true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy” (Philippians 4:4-7) instead of that which causes us to dwell on the offense.
 - **In Word** – As Luke 6:27-28 implies, the replacement principle applies to our words as well as our thoughts. When talking to others about the person who offended you, speak well of them, praise them, thank them, and encourage them!
 - ***Ephesians 4:29*** *Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.*
 - **In Deed** – C.S. Lewis once said, “Don’t waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, would will presently come to love him.” Loving actions don’t just change your feelings, they also communicate the reality of your forgiveness.
 - ***1 John 3:18*** *Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*