



Light from the Word

Biblical Approach to Conflict - Part 1

“And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.”¹

Conflict

Why does conflict exist? Occasionally, it is because of a deliberate attack by a person of evil intentions. Sometimes, conflict occurs when selfish motives usurp concern for others. But in the family of God, perhaps conflict occurs most often because of misunderstandings and poor communication. When left unaddressed, such conflict may increase tension, diminish trust, and create barriers. The diminished trust often leads to further misunderstandings, greater tension, increasingly lower levels of trust, and ultimately broken relationships that can be difficult to mend. For this reason, it is important that believers learn to address conflict with humility, love, and courage—and to do so without delay.

Even with the best of intentions, it is likely that sooner or later we will experience conflict. The Lord instructs us clearly to overlook (*forbear*) the little things, make the effort to be reconciled in more serious cases, and seek help if and when necessary.² In this first part of a two-part series, we will look at several biblical principles to consider how we can prevent and diminish conflict. In the second part, we will consider how to resolve conflict that has advanced to a state of offense, responding through the power of the Holy Spirit with godly love.

Prevention

Who can judge righteous judgment? The infamous words, “What is truth?”³ which Pilate uttered to Jesus perhaps reflected Pilate’s cynical frustration with judgment. Limited by our five senses, each one of us struggles to judge righteous judgment. An unartfully

spoken comment can be perceived as intentional. An experience shared and repeated by the listener often changes with each telling as details are misremembered. Such misstatements soon become fact to the listener and are repeated as truth. Reliable research shows that even the most well-intentioned eyewitness testimony is often erroneous. Stress can degrade our ability to remember accurately, previous experiences may bias our interpretation of an event, and suggestions or biases expressed by others may influence how we recall events.

All of these factors are exacerbated when the experience is related to us secondhand rather than experienced directly. Every retelling of a tale increases the likelihood that it is inaccurate, and paradoxically increases the probability that the incorrect details are perceived to be truthful by the teller of the tale. Perhaps it is for this reason that the Lord, since the days of Moses, teaches us of the sinfulness of repeating “stories.”⁴

Refusing to be either provider or receiver of false information is the first preventive step in dealing with potential conflict in a Christ-like manner. The Apostle Paul’s observation that, “*Charity thinketh no evil*” not only recognizes that charity refuses to pass on malicious gossip, but also teaches that true Christ-like love refuses to believe the tales that are told without firsthand proof. True Christian love consciously and by nature refuses to believe ill of one another without clear and unequivocal evidence. Putting love into preventive action is perhaps the best method of addressing conflict.

“It is not good to accept the person of the wicked, to overthrow the righteous in judgment. A fool’s lips enter into contention, and his mouth calleth for strokes. A fool’s mouth is his destruction, and his lips are the snare of his soul. The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly.”⁵

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Forbearance

At times, a brother, friend, or neighbor may fail to exercise discretion, and we experience the early symptoms of emotional pain or anger in response to the offense. In such cases, our next line of defense against an escalation of conflict is to forbear with our brother.⁶ To forbear with someone is to overlook and tolerate things that would have the potential to be offensive if we were unwilling to tolerate them. Forbearance is an expression of graciousness toward others, demonstrating an awareness of just how gracious God has been with us. If we are mindful of the depth of God's patience and mercy toward us, then we cannot help but be patient, understanding, and tolerant of others. Even then it can be a challenge to *feel* tolerant and we must instead choose to *be* tolerant.

How is it possible to overlook offensive behavior? Perhaps the first question should be, "Why do I feel hurt by the words or actions that I perceive to be offensive? Is there perhaps some element of truth to the words? Do I know all the facts about the perceived action? Have I ever done or said

something similar and been misunderstood? Asking the right questions can often lead us to a point of understanding that our perception was incorrect. Forbearance gives us the opportunity to examine our role in the conflict honestly.

Self-examination

Why is this such a crucial step? The Lord teaches us the folly of thinking we can see clearly to address issues in our brother if we have obstructed vision ourselves.⁷ How can one honestly examine oneself? It is critical to see ourselves as God sees us. That cannot happen if we do not pray for wisdom and clarity of vision. It can't happen if we are proud and unwilling to acknowledge that perhaps we played some role in the offense. In addition, we ought to ask ourselves whether perhaps some previous offense or hurt is being brought back to memory because of this current event. All too often, past hurts amplify minor events and the effect is compounded in our current perception.

According to the Jewish Law, parents who had an incorrigible rebellious son were to bring him before the council of the village elders as a key step in resolving the conflict. Perhaps the purpose in this step was to impel the parents to examine themselves before

asking the elders to get involved. Certainly, a wise elder would have inquired about the parents' role in provoking the rebellion. If the parents were not wise enough to examine themselves, it would have fallen to the elders to hold them accountable to examine their own role in the rebellion. Similarly, we are taught by Jesus that we should examine ourselves before any attempt to confront or correct an offense against us.

The Apostle Peter teaches us that charity covers a multitude of sins.⁸ By the grace of God, these steps of charity—prevention, forbearance, and self-examination—will eliminate or diminish most sources of conflict. In the second part of this series, we will look at the biblical steps to take when our best efforts to prevent and forbear are insufficient to keep conflict from disturbing brotherly love.

(Footnotes)

¹ 1 Peter 4:8

² Rom. 12:18

³ John 18:38

⁴ Lev. 19:15-18

⁵ Prov. 18:5-8

⁶ Col. 3:13, Eph. 4:2

⁷ Matt. 7:3-5

⁸ 1 Peter 4:8