

Family Legacy Institute

Tools For Families Building Godly Legacies

Adult Conflict Resolution

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I. Biblical References

A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense (Prov. 19:11).

Even if ...(someone) wrongs you seven times a day and each time turns again and asks forgiveness, forgive him (Luke 17:4).

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (Rom. 12:18).

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord (Rom. 12:19).

If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:20-21).

II. Introduction

Conflict is a natural part of life. Where there is more than one person, conflict will happen from time to time. When two dance together, they occasionally step on each other's toes. This is partially due to clumsiness, and partially because one wanted to go left when their partner chose to go right. Marriage is sometimes described as a "dance." By the time a couple has been married for 10 or 20 years, they have discovered several areas in which their spouse consistently wishes to go left when one wishes to go right.

Much of conflict can be reduced to two issues: Self-will, and power. These themes will be tracked throughout this chapter. In the end we will discover that conflict resolution is, perhaps more than anything else, a spiritual issue. However before developing that point, this chapter will seek to provide a deeper understanding of the roots of conflict. Techniques from the field of psychology will be presented. The chapter will then end with a short review of scriptural insight regarding conflict resolution.

It would be nice if it were possible to avoid all conflict. However, we live in a broken and sinful world so that's not realistic. There are many ways that people, and family systems attempt to deal with conflict. Some of them work well ~ some fail miserably. One thing we know pretty much for certain: That which family systems practice, they tend to pass along to their children and grand children.

It can be informative to study how other people have attempted to resolve conflict. There's much to be learned from the mistakes of other. This chapter begins with a short study of five biblical characters who attempted to resolve their conflicts in ways that today we would call, "dysfunctional."

III. Five Dysfunctional Formats Of Conflict Resolution

A. Elisha ~ Overpowering the other party

In the ancient book of Second Kings, there was a moment when several bratty children "dissed" a prophet of God. They insulted him and called him names. So he used the power that God had given him to summon two bears from the woods, and the bears mauled the children. Does this sound crazy? Here's the story.

"Elisha left Jericho and went up to Bethel. As he was walking along the road, a group of boys from the town began mocking and making fun of him. 'Go away, you baldhead!' they chanted. 'Go away, you baldhead!' 24 Elisha turned around and looked at them, and he cursed them in the name of the LORD. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of them. 25 From there Elisha went to Mount Carmel and finally returned to Samaria" (2 Kings 2:23-25 ~ NLT).

Not exactly a glowing example of how to handle conflict in a wise, gentle manner, but how many times have you wished that you could make something happen, perhaps engineer some big event in the lives of people with whom you're having conflict, in order to teach them a lesson? Perhaps you've even done something to ratchet up the ante. When we ratched up the ante, it's usually out of a sense of wounded pride, and it usually involves power. That's what Elisha did.

Of course, the children's parents probably wished they could ratchet up the ante against Elisha. And one wouldn't be surprised if Elisha's reputation in that part of the world took a hit as people whispered behind their hands, "He used bears to attack children because they wounded his pride ~ and he really doesn't have much hair does he...."

There are problems with using power to solve conflict in marriage.

- . It creates enemies.
- . It causes people to want to get even ~ builds resentment.
- . It establishes a dysfunctional relational pattern between the powerful person and those with less power.

- . It deprives those with less power of any hope of making a contribution to solving the conflict.
- . It tends to demoralize the less powerful person.
- . It creates adversarial relationships.
- . It destroys trust and relational intimacy.
- . It destroys respect
- . Sexual drive in women is frequently diminished.

Yet don't we all sometimes wish we had so much power that we could crush someone into agreeing with us, or crush them for disagreeing with us? There are times when the use of power is necessary. When an infant is running away from a parent toward a busy street, the parent has not only the right but the responsibility to use power to grab the infant and force him to return to the sidewalk.

Yet often power is used neither well nor wisely. Pride frequently leads us to abuse of power. We can see this in others, but we often miss it in ourselves. In the end, powerful people often learn, too late, that they lost their ability to achieve their objectives through use of power. Consider the dad who constantly spansks his son ~ there comes a day when he can't hit the kid hard enough to make a difference. Meanwhile, he has created a defiant, bitter son who can hardly wait to get away from dad's influence.

The use of power within spousal relationships is usually not a good idea. It usually brings about many of the symptoms indented above. Yet power is an area many therapists investigate early. Here are a few formats of power commonly seen within marriage:

- . He earns more money.
- . She can manipulate him through her sexuality.
- . He is physically stronger and can force his will upon others.
- . She is more able to turn the kids against him.
- . He is able to out-argue her.
- . She is good at using the victim role to make him look stupid.

Actually, just about anything can be used for power within a marriage. The use of power can vary from harsh words to physical beating; from sexual with-holding to rape; from manipulating the kids to divorce; from verbal abuse to murder. The wise spouse stays well away from using power to manipulate or control their partner.

B. Jacob ~ Triangling and conflict avoidance

A second dysfunctional approach to conflict resolution is avoidance. There's a fascinating, dysfunctional family system found in the book of Genesis. In this family dad was triangled with oldest son against mom, and mom was triangled with younger son against dad. The story is found in Genesis chapters 27 and 28. You might take a couple of minutes and read the whole story, and as you read, ponder all you've learned in this course about family systems, triangling, and cross-generational coalitions.

At one point the older brother (Esau) became so angry that he decided to murder his younger brother (Jacob). Here's a short snippet of the story. Observe how the mother (Rebecca) handled conflict in this situation.

"Esau hated Jacob because he had stolen his blessing, and he said to himself, 'My father will soon be dead and gone. Then I will kill Jacob.' But someone got wind of what Esau was planning and reported it to Rebekah. She sent for Jacob and told him, 'Esau is threatening to kill you. This is what you should do. Flee to your uncle Laban in Haran. Stay there with him until your brother's fury is spent. When he forgets what you have done, I will send for you. Why should I lose both of you in one day?'" (Genesis 27:41-45 ~ NLT).

Mom (Rebecca) taught her youngest (Jacob) son to manipulate his brother (Esau), and then run from conflict. Before being too harsh on her, ask yourself if you've ever run away from processing an issue as a means of avoiding conflict. Have you ever "walked on eggshells" around someone? Have you ever stomped out of a room in anger? Have you ever driven away from a problem? Have you ever gone out of your way to avoid being around someone, to avoid conflict? A surprising percentage of mature adults handle conflict by attempting to avoid it. "If I avoid it long enough it'll resolve itself ~ it'll go away."

There are problems with this approach. Here are a few of them:

- . Avoidance creates weakness rather than strength.
- . It causes the initial problem to escalate as people reach for further ammunition.
- . Smouldering fires tend to re-ignite, sometimes far from their sources.
- . Initial problems are worsened, as individuals begin making assumptions.
- . Both parties are denied the opportunity to use their differences to clarify relational issues or seek solutions.
- . Physical symptoms can emerge as people internalize rather than face issues.
- . Marital trust and relational intimacy is eroded.
- . Sexual drive in women is frequently diminished.

In the end, avoidance actually does more to create adversarial relationships than it does to resolve conflict.

Yet how many evenings have you slept in the same bed with your spouse, with an invisible wall of ice between you. How many times have you told your spouse, "No, nothing's wrong ~ everything's OK," when in reality you're deeply wounded or really angry? Avoidance either postpones the day when the situation will be discussed, or it feeds a rift which silently widens. In many cases, by the time the initial problem is discussed, it has often become more pervasive and powerful than it was at the beginning.

C. Abraham ~ Bargaining

Another approach to conflict resolution involves bargaining. I'll do "X" if you do "Y." In some situations bargaining can lead to productive solutions. At least it brings the issues to the table where people can discuss them and interact with each other.

There's a fun story involving bargaining in Genesis 18:23-33. In this situation God had told Abraham that He was going to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. They were wicked cultures and God had reached the point of no return with them. There was no remedial action that might change them and draw them to God. The only solution was to destroy them. Yet Abraham bargained with God. We have all probably attempted to bargain with God at one time or another. Here's Abraham's approach to bargaining.

"Abraham approached (God) and said, 'Will you destroy both innocent and guilty alike? Suppose you find fifty innocent people there within the city — will you still destroy it, and not spare it for their sakes? Surely you wouldn't do such a thing, destroying the innocent with the guilty. Why, you would be treating the innocent and the guilty exactly the same! Surely you wouldn't do that! Should not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?' And the LORD replied, 'If I find fifty innocent people in Sodom, I will spare the entire city for their sake.' Then Abraham spoke again. 'Since I have begun, let me go on and speak further to my Lord, even though I am but dust and ashes. Suppose there are only forty-five? Will you destroy the city for lack of five?' And the LORD said, 'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five.' Then Abraham pressed his request further. 'Suppose there are only forty?' And the LORD replied, 'I will not destroy it if there are forty.' 'Please don't be angry, my Lord,' Abraham pleaded. 'Let me speak — suppose only thirty are found?' And the LORD replied, 'I will not destroy it if there are thirty.' Then Abraham said, 'Since I have dared to speak to the Lord, let me continue — suppose there are only twenty?' And the LORD said, 'Then I will not destroy it for the sake of the twenty.' Finally, Abraham said, 'Lord, please do not get angry; I will speak but once more! Suppose only ten are found there?' And the LORD said, 'Then, for the sake of the ten, I will not destroy it.' " (NLT).

Have you ever prayed, "Lord, if you help me with 'X' problem, then I'll go to church every week, I'll give money to the poor, and I'll treat my spouse well." That's bargaining. "God if you do X then I'll do Y." Yet as healthy as bargaining can be, there can be problems with this approach.

- It can be a selfish endeavor, focusing too much upon one's own demands while ignoring the needs, feelings and objectives of the other.
- It can be manipulative, focusing on what one party can coerce from the other.
- It can exaggerate what one really wants, as when each side starts demanding more than they will likely get in hopes they might end up with what they want.
- The ongoing jostling of bargaining often creates spin-off conflicts.
- It often distorts the relative values of the items used as bargaining chips.
- Some people are better at negotiating than others, and when people are out-manuevered through bargaining, it tends to set up the next conflict.

Bargaining can be effective if:

- . Both sides enter the dialogue in good faith.
- . Both sides commit to the process long enough to see it through.
- . Both sides communicate their real needs, feelings and objectives.
- . Both sides make reasonable concessions for reasonable gains.
- . Some system of checkpoints is agreed upon.

Bargaining sometimes involves seeking wise counsel from a neutral third party such as a close friend, therapist, or pastor.

D. Eli ~ Using band-aids to cover up problems

Another approach to conflict resolution is the bandaid approach. It may momentarily solve the conflict, but it's like using aspirin to treat cancer. There's a sad story in First Samuel chapter two. A priest named Eli had sons who were out of control. They were doing many bad things including sleeping with lots of women. Here's part of the story.

"Now Eli was very old, but he was aware of what his sons were doing to the people of Israel. He knew, for instance, that his sons were seducing the young women who assisted at the entrance of the Tabernacle. Eli said to them, 'I have been hearing reports from the people about the wicked things you are doing. Why do you keep sinning? You must stop, my sons! The reports I hear among the LORD's people are not good. If someone sins against another person, God can mediate for the guilty party. But if someone sins against the LORD, who can intercede?' But Eli's sons wouldn't listen to their father.... (1 Sam. 2:22-25 ~ NLT).

Apparently Eli had been reluctant to deal firmly with his sons from an early age, because by the time they were adults and he was a grandpa, they basically ignored him. They obviously had no respect for their dad. The most he did was to wag his finger at them and warn them. That's not dealing with conflict. Have you ever known parents who clucked their tongues at their kids but never really dealt with the problems in their children's characters? In one situation two parents used band-aids rather than meaningful conflict resolution. They had two kids ~ a son and a daughter. Both paid dearly for their parents' use of band-aids. When their son was a senior in high school he murdered a peer ~ claimed it was an accident ~ the gun went off and his peer's head got in the way. The boy was not charged. Later, he dealt drugs out of his home, running away to Mexico when the authorities busted him. His sister divorced her husband after 18 months of marriage, because his career took him to a city four hours away from her mother. In the end, actually dealing with problems is far less costly than using band-aids.

Obviously there are problems with the bandaid approach to conflict resolution.

- . It creates a

- . It creates the illusion that conflict has been addressed.
- . In so doing it merely postpones date of actual conflict resolution.
- . During the interim time, emotions often get higher, not lower.
- . The conflict often becomes more complex, not less.
- . It increases both parties' mistrust of the problem-solving process as both learn they're not really making progress.
- . It reinforces the status quo.
- . It rewards the one who is best at "sleight of hand."
- . It leads to disrespect for authority.
- . It disempowers all parties, since nobody truly develops a solution.
- . Nor does anyone improve their ability to resolve future conflicts.

As difficult as it can be, it's always better in the long run to face conflicts squarely and resolve them. The story of Eli's sons ended tragically ~ they died young. If Eli had squarely faced his sons' lack of character and from their early days had been willing to risk his relationship with them in order to demand better behavior, they'd have had more productive lives. But he didn't do that. He used bandaids ~ he treated the cancer of his sons' sin, with the asperin of tongue clucking and finger wagging.

Conflictual marriages sometimes go on for decades, as each spouse puts bandaids onto problems that drive both of them crazy. There's a story of an 87-year-old couple standing before a judge, seeking divorce. The judge says, "Let me get this straight ~ you're both 87, and you've been married since you were 22. So why are you divorcing?" In a voice trembling with rage, the wife says, "Your honor, enough is enough!!"

E. Saul ~ Pretending everything's OK

Sometimes conflicting people try to pretend everything is OK. This is different than avoidance. Avoidance ignores problems. Cover-up attempts to put a good face on problems in order to make a good appearance. The reason for making a good appearance may be created by fear or by ice in the veins as one sweetly looks for a moment to drive home a dagger. Just below the surface there may be a rip tide of emotion, but the surface looks calm and happy as the person smiles and plays the game.

There's a biblical exmple of this approach to conflict resolution. It involved King Saul and the prophet Samuel. Saul had disobeyed God, and Samuel had announced that God was going to strip Saul's kingship away from him. Samuel then turned to walk away from Saul. We join the story at that moment.

"As Samuel turned to go, Saul grabbed at him to try to hold him back and tore his robe. And Samuel said to him, 'See? The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to someone else — one who is better than you. And he who is the Glory of Israel will not lie, nor will he change his mind, for he is not human that he should change his mind!' Then Saul pleaded again, 'I know I have sinned. But please, at least honor me before the leaders and before my people by going with me to worship the

LORD your God.’ So Samuel finally agreed and went with him.... (I Sam. 15:27-31 ~ NLT)

Saul basically asked Samuel to “put a good face” on the situation, to pretend everything was OK, and to accompany Saul in worship before the leaders of Israel in order that everyone might think there was no conflict. Saul apparently thought that pretending everything was right, might make it so ~ fake it until you make it.

Imagine a husband and wife dressing to go out for dinner with another couple. They’re having the fight of a lifetime. World War III has erupted in their bedroom. He is screaming and she is coiled in rage like a cobra waiting to strike. Then the doorbell rings and they both go to the door. As they open it their demeanor changes. They graciously smile at their friends, and spend the evening together as if everything was wonderful between them. Of course, the charm is only an inch deep and World War III awaits them at home.

Not many years ago a nationally-known pastor was terminated from a church he’d led for decades. The church was huge and thriving. But it finally became obvious to everyone that there was a “public” face and a “private” face to this pastor. When his wife went to the Elders with the truth of their marriage being in shambles, they gave the husband a few months to seek therapy and heal the relationship. But he preferred “putting on a good face” rather than learn to deal with marital conflict. It cost his job and his reputation.

Putting a good face on a hurting relationship has cost many marriages. Have you ever been shocked with the news that close friends are divorcing? “But they looked as if they had the perfect marriage.” Obvious problems exist when pretending things are OK.

- . Anything built on false pretenses is false, even if it appears true.
- . Integrity and trust become serious problems.
- . Marital intimacy ceases.
- . Female sexual response is eroded.
- . Anger replaces other emotions such as sadness, fear, and grief.
- . Since nothing is really solved, the poison remains in the relationship.
- . The couple begins creating alternate, dysfunctional systems in their marriage.

Ten Minute Reflection

In your family of origin were any of these five dysfunctional methods of conflict resolution used? Tell one brief story about how one of these dysfunctional methods was used, and how it affected the family.

III. Basis of Conflict

In the introduction to this chapter it was stated that most conflicts can be reduced to two basic themes: self will, and power. While not all conflict is that simple to diagnose, much of it is. To understand this hypothesis better, consider the very first sin ~ the sin

preceeding the Garden of Eden. It occurred in heaven. Here's how it went down. There was an angel named Lucifer ~ A.K.A., the "shining star of morning," who decided to take over God's creation. His coup failed, and here is the observation made about the attempt.

"How you are fallen from heaven, O shining star, son of the morning! You have been thrown down to the earth, you who destroyed the nations of the world. For you said to yourself, 'I will ascend to heaven and set my throne above God's stars. I will preside on the mountain of the gods far away in the north. I will climb to the highest heavens and be like the Most High.' But instead, you will be brought down to the place of the dead, down to its lowest depths. Everyone there will stare at you and ask, 'Can this be the one who shook the earth and the kingdoms of the world? Is this the one who destroyed the world and made it into a wilderness? Is this the king who demolished the world's greatest cities and had no mercy on his prisoners?'" (Isa. 14:12-17 ~ NLT).

Satan, identified as "Lucifer" in the old King James version, decided he was going to "climb to the highest heavens and be like God." For reasons having to do with His sovereign plan, God allowed this evil thought to hatch into a plan, and soon the plan became a frontal attack against God as Satan tried to take over. In this short text one can see the origins of much conflict: Satan wanted God's power, so he tried to forcefully take it. Self will; power.

Satan used the same motivation in the Garden of Eden as he pitted God's creation, man, against God. Satan used self will and power as the bait on the hook. He said to Adam and Eve, *"God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil"* (Genesis 3:5 ` NIV). Can you see the bait? "You will be like God." Self will; power.

Because of the Fall in the Garden of Eden there are times when conflict is unavoidable. Jesus Christ himself had much conflict in his life. There was a time when he made a whip out of strands of rope, and drove money-changers out of the temple. And there is no question that he was enormously conflicted with the religious elite of his day. Indeed, the roots of conflict are seldom as clearly seen as when the Son of God stood against the self will and power of the self righteous religious fundamentalists of his day.

Ten Minute Reflection

Discuss the origins of the Second World War. Track the themes of self will and power. Then discuss the origins of any crime ~ bank robbery, rape, burglary, perjury, murder, child molestation, whatever. Discuss self will and power.

Scripture addresses the root of most conflict. *"What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Isn't it the whole army of evil desires at war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous for what others have, and you can't possess it, so you fight and quarrel to take it away from them. And yet the reason you don't have what you want is that you don't ask God for it. And even when you*

do ask, you don't get it because your whole motive is wrong — you want only what will give you pleasure” (James 4:1-3 ~ NLT).

He wants a new car; she wants a new kitchen. He wants fast sex every other day; she wants an evening of dinner and theater, followed by an hour of romance before lovemaking. He wants to reach the top of his career; she wants him home every evening and weekend. He wants fish for dinner; she hates fish. He wants to vacation in Florida; she wants to go to Colorado. He wants to spend; she wants to save. He wants to go hunting and play golf with his buddies; she wants to play couples' Bridge and mixed doubles tennis. He wants a Golden Lab; she wants a poodle. He wants their kids to get straight “A's”; she thinks that standard is too high. He's a slob; she's a neatnick. He's a chauvinist; she's egalitarian.

The issue in all of these is not who's right. Rather, it's how the couple handles their conflicting perspectives. We all want only what will give us pleasure. We're all bent in the direction of power and self will. We are all experts at making our wishes sound as if they are the right thing, structuring conflicts so they will end where we want them to end. We all know what it takes to win and at times we're willing to pay any price ~ even the price of our marriage and children's future happiness. We might not say it like that, but often our decisions, attitudes and behaviors say it for us.

There's a fascinating incident in the life of Christ. It occurred at the beginning of his ministry. John the Baptist had preceded him on the world stage. Everyone knew about “Crazy John,” the prophet who wore a leather outfit, ate locusts and honey and hung out in the desert. He was a popular figure. Jesus had just begun his ministry. He was a newcomer on the stage. Yet the crowds were starting to turn to him. Then a contest of sorts erupted between John's disciples and Jesus' disciples. The religious elite were quick to pick up on the emerging conflict. Watch how Jesus resolved this conflict.

“The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee (Jn. 4:1-3 ~ NIV).

Jesus was the One about whom John had prophesied ~ the One for whom the nation of Israel had been waiting for centuries. He had every right to be the big dog on the block. But when a potential conflict arose between his disciples and John's, Jesus left Judea and headed north to Galilee. Jesus reacted counter-intuitively to the lures of power and self will.

One of the ways in which the themes of power and self will are played out is in the area of our perceived “rights.” When these “rights” are ignored or abrogated, we tend to feel like victims and our anger rises. Yet in this situation Jesus ignored his “rights,” and left the stage. He didn't leave in anger, nor did he grandstand his exit. He just quietly left the conflict and turned his attention elsewhere. The basis of much conflict is selfish desire, self-aggrandizement, and “rights” which we feel we're “owed” by others.

Ten-Minute Reflection

Share with the group one recent story of conflict between yourself and another adult. Track the themes of self will and power in your own life as you share the story.

IV. Techniques for Resolving Conflict**A. Focus on relational health**

There is no shortage of books dealing with conflict resolution. One author (Steven Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*) suggests both parties seek “Win-win solutions, or no game.” By this he means that if two people can’t come to a mutually satisfying solution (a “win-win” situation), then nobody gets their way and the two start all over again. Another author (Dennis Weeks, *Conflict Resolution*) outlines four strategic thoughts aimed at helping couples overcome conflict:

1. Focus upon **“We,”** instead of the normal **“I Versus You.”** When a wife is emotionally wounded by her husband, it’s not just “her problem.” It’s “their” problem.
2. Deal with conflicts within the context of the overall relationship ~ as in asking, “What’s this conflict doing to our relationship?” rather than merely asking, “What’s this conflict doing to me?”
3. Recognize that effective conflict resolution results in mutual benefits. Both people’s lives are improved following effectively resolving conflict.
4. Focus upon relationship building, not just conflict resolution.

B. Drive through the emotional fog

When we say “communicating through” emotions, imagine a car driving through a valley that’s socked in with fog. The driver doesn’t know what’s on the road ahead. To get to the other side, the car has to drive through the fogged-in valley. The same thought applies to much of conflict resolution. Our feelings are very often like a fog through which we need to drive. In this regard, one of the most helpful conflict resolution formats offers two skills: naming and scaling emotions.

Naming emotions may sound easy, but often it’s not, and for many reasons. For example, as a rule women are more adept at identifying their emotions than are men. Actresses Meg Ryan and Sandra Bullock often do a great job of expressing emotions in their movies. They may express deep sadness, raw fear, high elation, or woundedness and anger ~ and they are endeared by their audiences for doing so. By contrast the many, flinty Clint Eastwood characters never have feelings, and if one of the characters actually has some fleeting emotion, he never expresses it. Eastwood’s emotionless line, “Go ahead, make my day,” is enshrined in many men’s hearts. As often as not, men and women don’t approach the “emotional thing” from the same direction.

Furthermore, in our culture men are allowed free expression of anger and aggression, but are denied expression of fear and sadness. Guys who talk about being fearful and sad are often called “wimps.” Conversely, in this culture women are allowed the emotions of sadness and fear, but denied free expression of anger and aggressiveness. In this culture an angry, aggressive woman is often referred to as “an angry bitch.”

Further still, each family system handles emotions in its own unique way. Some systems are free and open with most emotions; others tend to lock most emotions away, or deny their existence.

Making things even more complex, the emotions that one experiences on the surface are not always the real deal. Anger can be particularly slippery, and is more often than not a “secondary emotion.” By this we mean that anger often masks other emotions. It’s like having severe pain in one’s back because one has a kidney stone in one’s ureter. Kidney pain is termed, “referred pain.” Anger is often like that.

To understand anger, imagine a tooth ~ a molar ~ with three roots. The crown of the molar is anger, but the roots are often sadness, fear, pain, or loss. For example, a man hits his thumb with a hammer. He’s in pain, but he expresses hot anger at the “stupid hammer.” A child comes home at 2:00 a.m. after a date and an 11:00 curfew. Both parents express anger, but their anger is driven by fear. A student gets a D on an important test. He expresses anger at the stupid teacher who made such a lousy test. But the anger is driven by sadness at having bombed the test.

In conflict resolution, it’s therefore important to name the emotion one is experiencing. If a woman is crying, her husband has no idea why until she says, “I’m sad about the loss of that lovely ring you bought me.” Until that moment the husband may have been thinking, “She found out about the \$400.00 fishing rod I bought and she’s angry at me.” It’s important to note that his response to her tears will be governed by how he perceives her emotions.

If a man is angry, his wife has no idea why until he says, “My boss just asked me to take a 25% pay cut ~ and after I earned \$1,000,000 for the company last year!” Until that moment his wife may have been thinking, “He thinks I’m overweight and he’s angry with me.” But when he says, “I’m angry because I’m sad, I feel betrayed and unappreciated, and because this is a huge loss to my self-esteem,” then and only then the couple is able to process the anger that he’s expressing.

Here’s a short list of some emotions. In order to practice learning to name your feelings, think about some recent incident in your life that caused an internal emotional response. In that moment, which of the following emotions (or combination of emotions) were you feeling?

- Abandoned, Accepted, Aggressive, Amused, Angry, Anxious, Anticipation, Apprehensive, Awe-struck
- Bitter, Bored, Bitchy

- . Calm, Comforted, Content, Confident, Cool, Courageous
- . Depressed, Disappointed, Disgusted, Desiring
- . Elated, Embarrassed, Envious
- . Fearful, Friendly, Frustrated, Funky
- . Grateful, Grief-stricken, Guilty, Glad
- . Hateful, Happy, Honored, Hopeful, Humble
- . Ignored, Impatient
- . Joyful, Jealous, Jubilant
- . Kind
- . Lonely, Loved, Loving, Lustful
- . Missing Someone, Modest
- . Nervous, Negative
- . Pained, Patient, Peaceful, Phobic, Pity, Pride
- . Rage, Remorseful, Repentant
- . Sad, Shamed, Shy, Sorrowful, Shocked, Suffering, Surprised, Scared
- . Terrified
- . Unappreciated, Undervalued, Unhappy, Unkind, Unloved, Upset
- . Vulnerable, Valueless
- . Wondering, Wonderment
- . Worried

Emotions often run in clusters. It's possible, for example, to be feeling angry, sad, terrified, vulnerable, bitter, depressed, and ignored at the same time. But emotions are like playing cards. It's unlikely that anyone knows the hand you hold until you put it on the table.

To men especially we say, don't just say, "I'm angry." That doesn't tell a person much of anything. Help the other person understand the root of the tooth ~ are you feeling sad, fearful, pained? Have you experienced some loss? Put all those cards on the table. To women we say, don't just say you're sad. Talk about what's driving the sadness. Put a few more cards on the table around the card of sadness, so that the other person can see what you're really experiencing. This is the first step in "driving through the fog of emotions."

As you drive through the fog, don't assume you can fix the other person. It's most likely that you can't. But what you can do is to be there with them, hear their pain, support and encourage them as they walk through their struggle, offer a kind word, and pray for them.

Scaling emotions is the next helpful component. How strong is that anger you're feeling? Is it rage, or are you just slightly miffed? How controlling is the fear ~ is it terror, or just hesitance? How strong is the sadness ~ does it overwhelm and control you, or can you get over it by having a short cry?

After naming our emotions, the next thing needed is to "scale them," or put them into a one-to-ten scale. So he says, "I'm really angry at my boss for demanding a 25% pay cut.

On a scale of 1 – 10, I’m at 10! Right now I’d punch him in the face if he were in the room with me.” In this way he also lets his wife know that the anger is not directed toward her. Yet because he is very angry, she now knows to be a little more careful in what she says ~ and not to bring up the new dent in the fender quite yet.

In processing the loss of her ring, his wife may say, “I’m really, really sad about this. I loved that ring. On a scale of 1 – 10 I’m at about 7.” Now he knows what she’s feeling, why she’s feeling it, and how strong the feeling is.

Naming and scaling feelings may sound simple and silly, but one of the greatest saboteurs to any conflict resolution is the hidden hand played by feelings ~ cards held closely to the vest and never put on the table. For this reason, many people go around and around the same conflict, never resolving anything and constantly putting out fresh fires. Until feelings are expressed and scaled, it’s as if the couple is trying to practice fire safety while there’s an arsonist on the loose.

C. Everything but the kitchen sink

The field of psychology abounds with techniques to resolve conflicts. Here’s a quick “everything-but-the-kitchen-sink” listing of techniques. Each of these techniques is valid, helpful, and has been successfully used in conflict resolution.

1. Seek time/place/atmosphere in which both parties may talk openly and comfortably.
2. Seek to understand the *other* party's needs, perspectives, feelings. (Listen twice as much as you talk. God gave two ears and one mouth ~ use them in that percentage.)
3. Check and confirm ~ don’t assume you’re hearing the other’s side ~ ask them if you’re understanding them correctly ~ state back to them what you just heard them say to you. (Use integrity here ~ don’t misquote them.)
4. Seek solutions based on shared, positive power (win/win solutions) ~ but avoid use of power to intimidate, control or win.
5. Focus upon the present and the future – *leave the past in the past*.
6. Generate multiple potential solutions; cut/paste one that works for both sides.
7. Deal with one issue at a time. Avoid stringing multiple issues together or evading one issue by manipulating the conversation toward another issue. Stay on task ~ finish discussing one subject before jumping to another.
8. Break potential solutions down into small, manageable steps.
9. Set a reasonable time-line for implementing solutions.
10. Agree on "check-point" dates to check in and see if the solution is working well for both parties, and whether everyone's living up to their commitments.
11. Take temporary “time-outs” if emotions are getting out of control ~ a few minutes or a half hour can help both sides cool down and think more clearly.
12. Don’t *interpret* the other person’s motives ~ just deal with the facts as presented. That is, avoid saying, “You may have said *this*, but really meant

that.”

13. Listen without interruption. Give eye contact.
14. Don't put words into the other person's mouth. (E.g., “What you're *really* saying here is....”)
15. Deal with emotions when they're small rather than ignoring them until you're out of control.
16. Talk to one another rather than through a third party (such as a child, a mutual friend, etc.) Triangulation almost always creates dysfunction.
17. Don't replay old tapes over and over again. This solves nothing, and is usually received like sand in pudding.
18. Bring solutions ~ don't just whine.
19. Agree to live with some disagreements.
20. Avoid threats ~ particularly threats about leaving. They usually solve nothing.
21. Avoid use of words like *never*, *always*. There are usually exceptions.
22. Avoid attacking the other person's character.
23. Express your *own* feelings, not somebody else's.
24. Avoid name calling.
25. Accept responsibility for your part in the conflict.
26. Keep short lists ~ avoid grudge-carrying.
27. Don't blow up unless you're a hand-grenade.

Ten Minute Reflection

In your family of origin, which parts of the A-to-Z list above were used; which were not? What effect upon conflict resolution did this have in your family?

Each of these is a good skill to learn. Each can help people work through conflict. The difference between psychology and scripture, however, is that while psychology tends to deal with techniques, scripture deals with the soul. Within the field of psychology there is no definition of right or wrong ~ it's squishy ~ “Post Modern” in philosophy. Within the field of psychology, nearly whatever one wishes to believe and do is OK, as long as their behavior doesn't negatively affect anyone else. As if that's possible. As if we all live on personal islands and have no contact with one another.

By contrast, within scripture the bottom line is a strong sense of “thus says the Lord.” There are unyielding values and firm instructions found in God's Word. Within God's economy, conflict resolution isn't just a set of techniques ~ it's a soul-bending process of building character and yielding power.

When we call God, “Our Father,” the picture comes to mind of a dad instructing his kids in how to have positive, healthy relationships. The heart of God is for His kids to have peaceful relationships. Yet sometimes one can almost feel the internal response to God, “Yes, that's all well and good in normal circumstances, but you don't know the jerk I'm dealing with.” And so the struggle of the soul is revealed, just as James expressed it

above: We want our own way. We defend our way as being the “right” way or the “best” way. In our hearts we think, “I deserve better.” In our hearts we tend to think that the other guy is the one with the problem.

Here are a few specific conflict management protocols taken from God’s Word. As you read them, ponder how they develop the character and lead toward maturity. Ponder also how your own heart responds to them ~ is there a “yes, but....” response that hints at personal resistance toward God? Does God really know what He’s talking about, or are these texts just more “good advice” not to be taken too seriously. Incidentally, most people find the psychological techniques presented above, far easier to use than the scriptural instructions presented below. This is so because scripture challenges our sinful nature and forces us to confront ourselves in the presence of God.

- A. Be mature enough to overlook the small stuff.
“A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense” (Prov. 19:11).
- B. Go to the other person and talk things out.
“If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the fault. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back” (Mt. 18:15).
- C. If you get stuck, ask for help.
“But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If that person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church” (Mt. 18:16-17).
- D. If someone carries a grudge against you, go to them.
“If you are standing before the altar in the Temple, offering a sacrifice to God, and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there beside the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God” (Mt. 5:23-24 ~ NLT).
- E. Forgive, completely, unequivocally.
“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Even if ... (someone) wrongs you seven times a day and each time turns again and asks forgiveness, forgive him” (Col. 3:12-13; Luke 17:4).
- F. Wage peace.
“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (Rom. 12:18 ~ NIV). “Blessed are the peace-makers, for they will be called sons of God” (Mt. 5:9 ~ NIV).

G. Break the “revenge cycle.”

“Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19 ~ NIV).

H. Use God’s counter-intuitive approach.

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:20-21 ~ NIV).

I. Burn your grudge list.

“Love keeps no record of when it has been wronged” (I Cor. 13:5 ~ NLT).

J. Observe God’s statute of limitations regarding our anger.

“Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold (Eph. 4:26-27 ~ NIV) .

Ten Minute Reflection

Which of the spiritual conflict resolution protocols listed above are most difficult, and why? What impact would using that “most difficult” protocol, have in resolving conflict?

God’s instructions for conflict resolution take us deep into our souls. We must ask ourselves, “Do I truly wish to follow hard after God?” If the answer is “Yes,” then His format is outlined above. By contrast, if our answer to that question is, “No,” or “Yes, but I still want to win,” then all of God’s Word is of no use and one is left to their own devices. One can do a quick “heart-check” by pondering whether they believe God’s instructions apply mainly to them, or mainly to the person with whom they have conflict. If they find their hearts basically redirecting God’s instructions to the other person in the conflict, then getting right with God is the first order of business.

There’s a fascinating tid-bit of spiritual insight available here. If one takes matters into one’s own hands, uses power to seek victory, and selfishly pursues one’s own interests, then one not only becomes the target of the other person’s frustration, slings and arrows. In that moment one also risks being on the wrong side of what God is trying to do.

By contrast, if one puts issues into God’s hands, seeks God’s purposes and uses God’s methods to resolve issues, then God becomes their ally. So an important spiritual question one must ask when in conflict is, “Am I getting in the way of what God is attempting to accomplish in this situation, or in this person?” We get in the way of God’s purposes when we attempt to resolve conflict using motives and techniques based upon self will and power.

At its lowest common denominator, conflict resolution is primarily an issue of the soul. The bottom line of most conflict involves power and self-will. God’s bottom line for His

children involves seeking His will, trusting His plan, and putting all the power back into His hands where it's safely and wisely used. The issue of trusting His plan can be challenging, for it forces us to ask ourselves whether we truly believe God knows our situation, has a plan, and cares about the outcome. As we wait upon Him rather than seizing the power, our characters are developed and His wisdom is birthed in us.

This may sound easy, but at times it's a downright painful experience as we struggle, gag and lurch through the death of our own self-will. However, the end product of trusting Him is a new creation ~ a mature person with outstanding dignity, solid integrity, deep wisdom, and impeccable character.

On my finger I wear a gold ring. For that ring to exist the gold first had to be mined ~ blasted and hacked out of the ground. Then all the dirt, rock and other stuff attached to it had to be forcibly removed. Then the gold was heated to the melting point. When it cooled it was shaped, bent, cut, and inscribed upon. All of these processes are metaphors for conflict. Undoubtedly, if the ring could speak for itself it would say that the process of becoming what it is today was conflictual and painful. Today I wear the ring with pride. It reflects a) a gift from someone I love, and b) promises made based on that love.

So it is in our relationship with God. Hanging onto conflicts and using unspiritual techniques in resolving them is like unrefined gold hanging onto chunks of rock and bits of dirt. The gold never becomes a ring. As we yield our lives to our loving Father, His process of refining us often leads through what we sometimes experience to be severely "heated" circumstances. His sharpest carving tools are often the very relationships that cause us greatest conflict. Yet as we invite His presence into our lives and place our conflicts into His keeping, His power becomes our best friend. It's not the power of helping us consistently win against those with whom we have conflict. Rather, it's the power of Him freeing us from the control of our self-will.

This is so because God's objective for us doesn't have to do with whether we have fish or beef for supper tonight, whether we vacation in Florida or Colorado, or whether we get a new car or a new kitchen ~ but whether we have been purified in His fire sufficiently that we are able to reflect the brightness of His son, Jesus Christ. Everything else is incidental.

Homework Assignment:

Spend a few minutes thinking about your most active or present conflict, and how it would change if you truly used the spiritual tools presented above. Then, if you wish to experience God's hand in your life, begin to implement these spiritual tools and watch how He begins to intervene in your conflicts.

V. Wrap

Conflict resolution is a widely-studied issue. Hundreds of books and Ph.D. dissertations have been written regarding this subject. But in the end, much of conflict resolution comes down to facing one's own quest for power.

This chapter has presented several techniques taken from the field of psychology. However, the more difficult yet effective approaches come from the spiritual realm, as we work on bending our own soul to God's will and God's ways, and then watch as He begins helping us resolve our conflicts.