

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues

Topic 31 – Resolving Conflict in Marriage

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Review

The Bible teaches that God established marriage as a life-long covenant – a life-long contract or promise between a man and woman publically entered into before God as witness. The purpose of marriage is ultimately to glorify God. In addition, marriage is for mutual companionship, procreation, pleasure, purity, and picturing Christ's relationship to the church.

God's will for all believers is not marriage, but it is that they glorify Him. Singles are not second-class Christians. Singleness, like all circumstances should be viewed as an opportunity to glorify God and serve Him and others.

The husband's role in marriage is to love his wife as Christ loved the church, live with his wife in an understanding way, and lead as a servant-leader.

The wife's role in marriage is to submit to her husband, respond to her husband respectfully and strive to have a heart attitude of fondness toward him. Her primary responsibility is the family.

God hates divorce from the covenant marriage, the current righteous or biblical marriage. There are two exception clauses to the permanence of marriage: sexual immorality and desertion by an unbelieving spouse. Even then, forgiveness and reconciliation are always the preferred outcome.

Introduction

Conflict, to some degree, is inevitable in marriage as two imperfect, forgiven sinners come together to form one flesh. Examples of conflict might be:

- A husband gets annoyed at his wife for taking too long to get ready.
- A wife gets annoyed at her husband for not picking up his dirty clothes.
- A husband buys a table saw (big ticket item) that his wife does not think he needed to buy.
- A wife buys a purse (small ticket item) that her husband does not think she needed to buy.
- A wife is angry over her husband's failure to lead in the marriage.
- A husband is angry over his wife's failure to submit in the marriage.
- A husband get angry and speaks harshly to his wife.
- A wife nags her husband regarding _____ .
- A husband gets angry with his wife for pushing the toothpaste from the middle of the tube.
- A wife gets angry with her husband for not helping around the house.

In each of these cases, sin is involved. Some of these examples start as disagreements that move into conflict. Couples can have disagreements because of differing backgrounds, viewpoints (like male and female), opinions, convictions, etc. A disagreement is not a conflict. God has made each of us unique. We do not all think the very same way on everything. A disagreement becomes a conflict when a spouse responds sinfully (in word or deed) to the disagreement.

Today we will look at how to resolve conflict in a marriage in a God honoring way.

Conflict Resolution

The Scriptures give us many principles for resolving conflict. Yet, there is not one definitive process for conflict resolution. Today, we will present a process for conflict resolution in marriage that attempts to systematize the Scripture's teaching on the subject.

1. Recognize that sin causes conflict.
2. Deal with your own sin first.
3. Forgive your spouse (This could be considered part of “Deal with your own sin first”).
4. Walk again in the Spirit.
5. Confess your sin to your spouse and seek their forgiveness.
6. If necessary, lovingly rebuke your spouse for their sin (be sure it is sin).

Let’s look at these principles in detail...

1. Recognize that sin causes conflict.

When there is conflict in a marriage, there is sin. Both you AND your spouse could be sinning (usual) or either you OR your spouse could be sinning. For example: one or both spouses is selfish or proud or has become angry, impatient, judgmental, bitter, harsh in speech, etc.

¹What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? ²You lust and do not have; *so* you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; *so* you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend *it* on your pleasures. ⁴You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. James 4:1-4

❖ **In conflict, do you usually think that the cause is someone else?**

You must also understand that in the conflict, God is still working to cause all things to work for your good and His glory. If you are obedient to the Word, that glorifies God. If you repent of sin, that glorifies God. Always, God’s purpose is for you to be conformed to the image of Jesus.

²⁸And we know that **God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.** ²⁹For those whom He foreknew, **He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son**, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; Rom 8:28-29

2. Deal with your own sin first.

Before confronting your spouse’s sin, first confront your own. The difficulty in conflict comes because one or both of the spouses refuses to admit they are sinning. Therefore, it is imperative that each spouse first look to themselves.

¹“Do not judge so that you will not be judged. ²For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. ³Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? ⁵**You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.** Matt 7:1-5

❖ **Where do you first look, yourself or your spouse?**

When you are involved in marriage conflict, first pray that God would show you your own sin.

²³Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; ²⁴And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way. Psa 139:23-24

Then commit to repent of what God shows you. Repentance will be demonstrated by sorrow, earnestness, vindication, indignation, fear, longing, zeal, and avenging of wrong (2 Cor 7:9-11).

❖ **What do you harbor in your heart?**

3. Forgive your spouse (see the study on forgiveness for an extensive study on personal, relationship healing forgiveness).

It is for sure that your spouse will sin against God and you. It is a given; it will happen. The offense is not what destroys relationships, it is the inability to forgive. You must forgive your spouse for how they have sinned against you. This is really part of “deal with your own sin” since refusing to forgive is a sin and if you are harboring sin in your heart, you will not be walking in the Spirit.

❖ **Do you view unforgiveness as a sin?**

Forgiveness Defined

Forgiveness is sending away a debt of sin. This part of the definition comes from the gospel writers’ use of the word “aphiemi” for “forgiveness” (Matt 6:12, 14-15; 9:6; 12:31-32; 18:21-35; Mark 2:5-10; 3:28; 4:12; 11:25-26; Luke 5:20-24; 7:47-49; 11:4; 12:10; 17:3-4; 23:34; John 20:23; Acts 8:22; Rom 4:7; James 5:15; 1 John 1:9; 2:12).

Forgiveness is freely, unconditionally, and continually initiating the canceling of a debt of sin. This part of the definition comes from the word meaning of “charizomai” which is used primarily in Paul’s epistles for “forgiveness” (Luke 7:42-43; 2 Cor 2:7-10; 12:13; Eph 4:32; Col 2:13; 3:13).

Forgiveness is exercised between people in the same way God in Christ Jesus has forgiven believers (Eph 4:30-32; Col 3:12-14). God has forgiven you **unconditionally**. Before Christ, you were dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). At some point, God called (Rom 8:30) and drew you to Himself, brought the gospel to you (Acts 10; Rom 10:8-17), and gave you the gift of grace and faith. In fact, the true saving faith that you exercise, which includes repenting (Mark 1:14-15; Acts 20:20-21) and surrendering your life to Christ (Luke 9:23-26), is a gift from God (Eph 2:8-9). You did nothing to deserve, earn, or obtain forgiveness. It is **unconditional**.

³⁰Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, **forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.** Eph 4:30-32 (see also Col 3:12-14)

When God forgives sin, he does not deal with you according to your sin (i.e. the way you deserve) and He removes the sin far from you.

¹⁰**He has not dealt with us according to our sins,** Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. ¹¹For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. ¹²**As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.** Psa 103:10-12

God is God and He cannot “forget” sin. In forgiveness, God makes a conscious choice to not bring your sin to memory or judgment.

²⁵“I, even I, am the one who **wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, And I will not remember your sins.** Isa 43:25 (see also Jer 31:33-34)

In forgiveness, God chooses to not count your sins against you.

¹⁸Now all *these* things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, ¹⁹namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, **not counting their trespasses against them,** and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. 2 Cor 5:18-20

Forgiveness has love as its basis. Someone who is loved by God in a saving relationship through Jesus Christ is able to love other people. This love “covers” a multitude of sins because it forgives.

⁸Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because **love covers a multitude of sins.** 1 Pet 4:8

Love “does not take into account a wrong suffered”. The one who loves does not hold on to a sin committed against them. Since love is a choice, you can choose to love even when we do not “feel” like it. In the same way, you can choose to forgive even when you do not feel like it.

⁴Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, ⁵does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, **does not take into account a wrong suffered,** ⁶does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 1 Cor 13:4-7

Forgiveness is the unconditional, gracious act of not holding personal sins (relationship breaking acts) against a person. It freely and unconditionally cancels a debt of sin, sending it away. It must be unceasingly initiated by the one sinned against. It is a conscious choice to not bring a sin to memory or judgment or to not take into account a wrong suffered.

Unforgiveness is a sin

Withholding forgiveness is a sin which interrupts our intimate fellowship with God. Holding on to any sin in our heart causes a break in our fellowship with God (Psa 66:18; Eph 4:30; Mark 11:24-26). When we look at the passages on forgiveness, primarily in the gospels, we see something interesting. We are called to forgive “anyone” and “everyone” who has sinned against us (Matt 6:9-15; 18:21-35; Mark 11:24-26; Luke 11:2-4); regardless if they have repented or not. The reason is clear, unforgiveness is a sin which breaks our relationship with God. We are called to put off sin and put on righteousness (Eph 4:22-24). Therefore, we must put off unforgiveness and put on forgiveness.

Self-Assessment

What are some ways to discern if you are harboring unforgiveness? Ask yourself the following questions while meditating on the Scriptures already mentioned in this study to help discern if you are holding onto unforgiveness:

1. Does my mind continue to dwell on instances when I have been sinned against?
2. Can I remember details of sins against me from a long time ago?
3. Do I continue to bring a sin up to the one who sinned against you?
4. Do I find myself telling other people about how I have been sinned against?
5. When I think of the person who sinned against, am I angry, bitter, or resentful?
6. When I think of the person who sinned against me, do I desire to see that person "pay" for what they did to me?
7. Do I have a secret desire for revenge against the person who sinned against me? Do I think something like "I wouldn't mind if something bad happened to that person."?
8. Do I seek opportunities to agape-love the person who has sinned against me?

If you answered “yes” to any question 1-7 and “no” to question 8, then most-likely you are holding unforgiveness in your heart. You must repent from this sin of unforgiveness and ask God for grace to be obedient in this area toward the one who sinned against you.

Unlimited forgiveness is commanded by God.

Jesus makes the point that forgiveness has no bounds; there is no number limit to forgiveness.

²¹Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “**I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.**” Matt 18:21-22

God’s commands are not optional. Believers have no right nor authority to discard those commands which they find distasteful. The Scriptures are clear that the person who has exercised true saving faith will love Jesus (1 John 4:19; 1 Pet 1:8-9). Since we love Jesus, we will seek to keep His commands out of gratitude for all that He has done for us.

¹⁵“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. John 14:15

²⁸Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; ²⁹for our God is a consuming fire. Heb 12:28-29

Because we have been forgiven by God, we can choose to forgive others. We can choose to obey and forgive or we can choose to not forgive and disobey. We should never say that we “cannot” forgive someone. The truth is that we choose to not forgive. Those that have exercised true saving faith in Christ have been born again (John 3:3-8; 2 Cor 5:17) and the power of sin over them has been broken (Rom 6). Sin and righteousness are now choices. Forgiveness is an act of love (1 Cor 13:4-7). Therefore, just like love, forgiveness is a choice of the will. We can choose to love (or forgive) even when we do not feel like.

Forgiveness is a decision of the will.

In forgiveness, God makes a conscious choice to not bring our sin to memory or judgment (Isa 43:25). We must do the same thing in forgiving others.

Forgiving does not mean lying to ourselves and making the past better than it was. It does mean refusing to live in the moment of the past offense. By continuing to bring to memory the past offense we allow the sin of bitterness to take root in our lives (Heb 12:14-15).

We can tell if we are bitter if we can remember details of an offense against us from long ago. Memorization is helped by repetition. If we bring to memory offenses against us over-and-over again, we begin to harbor anger and bitterness against the offender. By not bringing an offense to remembrance, by not dwelling on the offense and instead forgiving, we ensure that roots of bitterness will not take hold.

God forgave me an incomparable debt, the sin against me is small.

Matthew 18:21-35 gives us a great comparison between two people who forgive. One, a king, was owed much by one of his slaves. The other, a slave, was owed little by a fellow slave. The king forgave the huge debt, but the slave refused to forgive the puny debt.

Christians must always reflect God’s forgiveness because they have experienced that same forgiveness. The one-and-only, all-holy God has forgiven a lifetime of sin against Him. The very sin that sent His Son to the cross, He has forgiven. How could we then not forgive a small sin, by comparison, against us?

Imagine this: You have been graciously forgiven the debt of a large amount of money (say \$20,000,000). How could you not forgive someone else a small amount of money (say \$1,000)? The “small” amount is still a lot of money and it costs you something to forgive it, but it is nothing in comparison to the huge debt you have been forgiven.

❖ **Do you withhold forgiveness from your spouse?**

4. Walk in the Spirit.

The Christian life is not lived in your own strength. It is a life lived filled with the Spirit as the life of Christ flows through you. As you repent and once again bow before the Lord as the master, you will be filled with the Spirit and the life of Christ will flow through you. You will have the power to live a God-glorifying life. You will then exhibit the fruits of the Spirit.

²⁰I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, **but Christ lives in me**; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. Gal 2:20

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Gal 5:22-25

God's Word is the tool that God's Spirit uses to produce God honoring change in God's child. Therefore, you must commit to be obedient to God's Word.

❖ **What would be true in your marriage if you were consistently walking in the Spirit?**

5. Confess your sin to your spouse and seek their forgiveness.

Now that you have dealt with your own sin and are walking in the Spirit, it is time to move positively toward your spouse to heal the relationship by confessing your sin and asking their forgiveness.

²³Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your offering there before the altar and go; **first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.** Matt 5:23-24

¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "**Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight;** ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men." Luke 15:18-19

Believers are to do everything they can to live at peace with their spouse.

¹⁷Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸**If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.** Rom 12:17-18

¹⁴**Pursue peace with all men,** and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. Heb 12:14

❖ **Are you stingy in asking for forgiveness?**

6. If necessary, lovingly rebuke your spouse for their sin (be sure it is sin).

There may be times when your spouse sins and does not (or will not) confess his/her sin and repent. At that time you should rebuke to your spouse. This should be done in love and only when you are filled with the Spirit.

¹Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, **restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness;** *each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Gal 6:1

❖ **Do you "rebuke" in the middle of the conflict or after you have dealt with your own sin and moved toward your spouse to ask forgiveness?**

How to Avoid Conflict

We have looked at how to resolve conflict, but we should strive to never enter conflict.

1. Walk in the Spirit.

If you are walking in the Spirit (moment by moment yielded up to God, bowing before Him and not other masters), then you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. You will not find pleasure in the things that cause conflict nor in the conflict itself.

¹⁶But I say, walk **by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.** ¹⁷For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. Gal 5:16-17

Being filled with the Spirit provides the power to live a God-glorifying life.

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴**Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.** ²⁵**If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.** Gal 5:22-25

2. Be easy to live with.

A demanding person who interacts with people in a demanding way is not living at peace. You should avoid and eliminate things that foster disharmony. Don't be picky.

¹⁷Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸**If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.** Rom 12:17-18

⁷When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him. Prov 16:7

❖ **Are you striving to be easy to live with?**

3. Love your spouse.

Love is the sacrificial commitment of my will to another's needs and best interests regardless of the cost to myself. Love is significant because love keeps short accounts.

⁴Love is patient, love is kind *and* is not jealous; love does not brag *and* is not arrogant, ⁵does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, **does not take into account a wrong suffered,** ⁶does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 1 Cor 13:4-7

⁸Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because **love covers a multitude of sins.** 1 Pet 4:8

❖ **Do you sacrificially love your spouse?**

4. Serve your spouse.

Mutual submission and sacrificial service empowered by the Holy Spirit takes the focus of yourself and how you are not being given what you want.

¹⁸And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but **be filled with the Spirit, ...** ²¹**and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.** Eph 5:18, 21

³Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Phil 2:3-4

¹³For you were called to freedom, brethren; only *do not turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. Gal 5:13

❖ **Do you sacrificially serve your spouse?**

Concluding Thoughts

Conflict is caused by sin. When there is conflict, we must first look to ourselves, repent of our own sin, forgive, and bow before the Lord being once again filled with the Spirit. Then we can go to our spouse seeking their forgiveness. Sometimes it will be necessary to rebuke our spouse.

Real Life Scenarios

Yourself #1: Your spouse has done the same thing over the years that has now become a constant irritant for you. You have never told him/her, but you are sure he/she does it just to annoy you. What should you do?

Yourself #2: Your spouse has spoken harshly to you. What should you do?

Yourself #3: Your spouse is clueless about how his/her behavior is hurtful to you. What should you do?

Someone Else #1: A church friend confided in you that they and their spouse are often fighting. There is never a resolution to the conflict, they just cool down for a couple of days and then get back to “normal”. Yet, he/she tells you about the wall that is developing between them. In thinking about bringing biblical care to your hurting friend, what is the first thing you need to know? What is the next thing you might share with him/her?

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues
Topic 31 – Conflict Resolution – Additional Study

Reread the sections in this study on the steps to conflict resolution.

1. Recognize that sin causes conflict.
2. Deal with your own sin first.
3. Forgive your spouse (This could be considered part of “Deal with your own sin first”).
4. Walk again in the Spirit.
5. Confess your sin to your spouse and seek their forgiveness.
6. If necessary, lovingly rebuke your spouse for their sin (be sure it is sin).

What is your purpose in pursuing resolving conflict in your marriage?

Which area do you struggle most with?

Do you easily forgive and seek forgiveness?

Read these passages on forgiveness: Psalm 103:10-12; Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31:33-34; Matthew 6:9-15; 18:21-35; Mark 11:24-26; Luke 11:2-4; Romans 12:14-21; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Ephesians 4:30-32; Colossians 3:12-14; and 1 Peter 4:8.

What aspects of God’s forgiveness do you fail to live out in your own life?

Is forgiveness prominent in your life?

When you forgive, what are you trying to accomplish?

When you do not forgive, what are you trying to accomplish?

Re-read the self-assessment from this study.

Are you holding onto unforgiveness toward your spouse? If yes, God calls unforgiveness sin. What are you called by God to do?