

Conflict and Forgiveness

Living as ambassadors
of reconciliation



Study 1: Conflict as opportunity

If we live in proximity to other human beings, we will encounter conflict. It's everywhere. In this series of sermons and small group studies we will explore how handling conflict fits in with being a follower of Jesus. We'll consider conflict and forgiveness in the home, in church, in the workplace, and in society more broadly. We'll consider scenarios where we are the person who has been wronged or offended, scenarios where we have wronged or offended someone else, and scenarios where we are bystanders to a conflict between others. These small group studies will examine some key Bible passages, and the sermons will explore the topics more broadly.

To begin, we're going to look at the big picture and see how conflict and forgiveness fit within God's agenda for his world.

"In the midst of conflict, we have an opportunity to demonstrate the love and reconciliation that Christ offers, embodying the Gospel message in our actions."

Tim Lane and Paul David Tripp, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*

"Addressing conflict is an essential part of Christian discipleship, for it reflects the heart of our calling: to be ministers of reconciliation."

Lynn Buzzard, *Reconcilable Differences: Hope and Healing for Troubled Marriages*

Read Ephesians 1:3-10

1. What blessings has God given us in Christ? Make a quick list.
2. Look at the last few verses. What is God's purpose/will/agenda for the world?
3. How does conflict and reconciliation fit with what God is doing?

Read Ephesians 2:11-18

4. According to this passage, what change has happened to the readers?
5. What is God's purpose in doing this?

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

6. What was God doing in Christ?
7. What is displayed in a person who belongs to Christ? (v17)
8. How does this passage portray the role, or task, of Christians?

Think over all the passages we've read today.

9. Fill in the blanks of the key verses below. (Can you do it from memory?)
 - God's will is to _____ all things under Christ (Eph 1:10)
 - God's purpose is to make _____ humanity, thus making _____ (Eph 2:15)
 - In Christ, God was _____ the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19)
10. Can you summarise in one sentence why dealing with conflict well is an important part of being a follower of Christ?

11. How do the passages we've looked at today guide us in responding to the following scenarios?

- a. Evelyn and Isabella are both very involved in church life but have very different opinions on things and have clashed in the past. Evelyn says to you "Dealing with Isabella is too hard. She's obviously got problems. I'm just going to make sure we don't cross paths in future".
- b. St Fictional's church is located in a rural mining town. Half of its small congregation are mine workers who often go on strike. The other half of the congregation is mine managers and investors. The parish council suggests to you, the minister, that two separate services should be held on Sundays, so that members can feel comfortable worshipping with people of their own demographic.
- c. Philip, a Christian friend of yours, lives with two other flatmates. His flatmates are constantly bickering about mess around the house, whose turn it is to take out the rubbish, and a million other things. Philip can see how their conflict is escalating, but when telling you about it he shrugs and says "it's between them, it's not my problem, I'm going to keep a safe distance so I don't cop any flak"

Notes & Prayer Points

Study 2: Conflict Responses

“...the responsibilities to confront and to forgive are equally laid on us. The reality of human temperament is that few can sustain such a balance without the help of the Holy Spirit. People are prone to be either more ready to confront and challenge than to forgive, or more ready to forgive and forget than to challenge.”

Tim Keller, *Forgive: Why should I and how can I?*

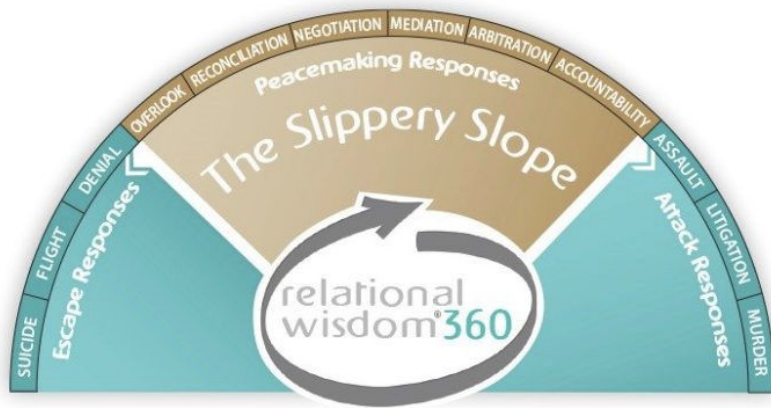
1. Think about what you heard in the talk on Sunday. Was there anything which particularly struck you, inspired you, or raised questions for you?
2. Have a think about your own typical way of responding to conflict. It does depend on the situation, but we all have general tendencies. Circle 3 of the options below you are most likely to use. Be honest!

A. Run away and hide	F. Physical violence
B. Friendly open ended conversation	G. Brush it off and forget about it
C. Verbal attack	H. Seek independent advice
D. Seethe but put on a fake happy face	I. Legal action
E. Stern conversation defining a clear boundary	J. Vent to a friend

The writer Ken Sande divides conflict responses into three main categories:

- **Peace-faking** responses (various forms of escape or denial)
- **Peace-breaking** responses (various forms of attack)
- **Peace-making** responses (assorted ways to resolve the conflict)

(See <https://rw360values.org/slippery-slope/>)



Read Ephesians 4:1-6

3. Look at the different conflict responses in question 2. Can you find verses in this passage which speak against or in favour of that approach?

Read Ephesians 4.25 - 5.2

4. What instructions about *speech* are given in this passage?
5. How can these be applied in a conflict situation?
6. What instructions about *anger* are given in this passage?
7. Verse 27 warns about “giving the devil a foothold”. How might this happen?
8. Look at the different conflict responses in question 2. Can you find verses in this passage which speak against or in favour of that approach?

9. Verse 31 says to ‘get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every kind of malice’. Is it simply a matter of “forgetting about it and moving on”, or are there other ways this can be achieved?
10. What does this passage say about who we *are* as Christians? (look near the beginning and end of the passage)
11. Verse 32 urges us to forgive one another. What reason, inspiration, or illustration is given for this?

Some conflicts go on for a long time, despite efforts to resolve them. Some conflicts are never resolved. Romans 12:18 says “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone”. Sometimes we do all we can but making peace is not possible. More on this next week.

Discuss in pairs or reflect individually:

12. Are there people with whom you have unresolved conflicts? Is there bitterness, anger or malice that you are holding on to?
13. What steps could you take to work towards making peace?
14. Ask your partner, or the group, to pray for you in this particular situation.

Notes & Prayer Points

Study 3: Speaking and Listening

"Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy." -- Proverbs 27:5-6

"The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. Whoever ignores instruction despises himself, but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence." -- Proverbs 15:31-32

"Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbour frankly so you will not share in his guilt" – Leviticus 19:17

1. Think about what you heard in the talk on Sunday. Was there anything which particularly struck you, inspired you, or raised questions for you?

*In the last study we looked at different responses to conflict: **peace-faking**, **peace-breaking** and **peace-making**. Today we'll look at Jesus' teaching about **peace-making approaches** which involve speaking with the other person involved.*

Read Luke 17:3-4

2. According to Jesus, what should be the first step if a brother or sister in Christ sins against you?

3. What might this look like in practice? Do you find this easy or hard?

4. Circle the words you think belong at the end of the following sentence, and cross out the words that don't belong. Discuss your choices.

"According to Jesus, forgiveness should be..."

- *automatic* • *unconditional* • *recurring* • *immediate*
- *conditional* • *limited* • *heartfelt* • *abundant* • *rare*

In Matthew's gospel we read some more detailed steps in the process:

Read Matt 18:15-20

5. Draw a flowchart of the multi-step process Jesus describes in verses 15-17.

6. What outcome is desired at each step?

7. Imagine that somebody has obeyed verse 15 and approached you privately to point out a way you have hurt them.
 - a. What temptations would you face in this situation?

 - b. What could the other person do to make it more likely for you to listen and accept their complaint?

 - c. What truths could you tell yourself to help you make a good response in this kind of situation?

8. When deciding to involve other people as Jesus describes, how would you decide who to involve? What dangers would you need to watch out for?

9. Have you experienced a conflict that you needed to deal with this way? Why do you think we often don't follow this procedure?

Jesus recognises that even after the church (perhaps church leaders) become involved, a person may refuse to acknowledge their wrongdoing. Treating them as a "pagan or a tax collector" means breaking contact and keeping your distance. Verses 18-20 probably mean that when church leaders exercise church discipline in this way, they are authorised representatives of Jesus, the head of the church. However Jesus also taught us "love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:44-45 NLT). Let's think now about a famous passage about love in action in a Christian community.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 as printed below.

10. Choose three of the phrases below and think of ways they can be put into practice in a conflict situation.

Love waits patiently.	
Love acts kindly.	
It does not envy,	
it does not boast,	
it is not proud.	
It does not dishonour others,	
it is not self-seeking,	
it is not easily angered,	
it keeps no record of wrongs.	
Love does not delight in evil	
but rejoices with the truth.	
It always protects,	
always trusts,	
always hopes,	
always perseveres.	

Notes & Prayer Points

Study 4: Forgiveness and Reconciliation

"Forgiveness is not an emotion but an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart." - Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*.

1. Think about what you heard in the talk on Sunday. Was there anything which particularly struck you, inspired you, or raised questions for you?

Read Matthew 18.21-35

11. Would the average person be willing to forgive someone seven times, as Peter suggests in verse 22? What sort of answer do you think Peter is expecting?
12. Look at the interaction between the first servant and the king
 - a. How much did the servant owe his master?
 - b. What did the servant ask for, and what did he get?
13. Look at the interaction between the first servant and the second servant.
 - c. How much did the second servant owe the first servant?
 - d. What did the second servant ask for, and what did he get?
14. What reasons can you imagine for the first servant treating the second servant as he did?

15. When you think about your relationship to God, do you appreciate how it is similar to the first servant's relationship to his master?

16. Jesus issues a strong warning in verse 35. Read Matthew 6:14-15 where he makes a similar point. How do these warnings make you feel? Why?

17. Is this story teaching us that God is waiting for us to forgive others before he will forgive us? Discuss.

18. Is this story teaching us that we must forgive those who are unrepentant? Discuss.

19. It's a deeper and deeper realisation of how much God has forgiven us which will empower us to be people who forgive others. What regular practices can we engage in to train our hearts to realise and remember this reality?

Reflect on this series as a whole

20. What is something in this series that has been NEW for you?

21. What is something in this series that has been CHALLENGING for you?

22. What specific things can your group PRAY for, in order for you to grow as a peacemaker and as an ambassador of reconciliation?

Notes & Prayer Points

"To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you." - C.S. Lewis, *Essays on Forgiveness*.