Dealing With Conflict

What does the Bible say?

Conflict: It Happens

- Occasional conflict in marriage is both normal and inevitable.
- How you handle conflict determines whether it harms your relationship or helps you to grow.
  - 1 Corinthians 7:28 “But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned… Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you.”
  - John 16:33 “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

Conflict: the How-Tos

- Working through conflict successfully takes honest and truthful communication done in a loving manner. (Ephesians 4:15)
- Remember to examine your motives.
- Would you be able to receive it, if someone came to you in this manner?
- Love is a very considerate awareness of the other person.
- Active listening is a key skill to understanding each other and in dealing with conflict.

Conflict: Forgiveness

- The ongoing practice of seeking forgiveness and being forgiving is essential to a healthy, Christ-centered marriage.
  - Ephesians 4:32 “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”
  - Mark 11:25 “And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”
Conflict: Acceptance & Forbearance

- Accept you will not agree on everything. Forbearance is an act of love.
- *Colossians 3:12-14* "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness."

Conflict: Acceptance

- Definition #1
  - To bless
- Definition #2
  - To acknowledge reality
  - Sometimes we can’t do the first…but in order to handle life well, we must do the second.

Avoid the 50-50 “Game”

- Occurs when spouses base their willingness to do their part on how well they perceive their spouse to be fulfilling their part of a contract.
- Christian marriage is a covenant!!

Ways People Handle Conflict

**Do you run toward it? Away from it?**

Handling Conflict: How Do You Feel?

- People vary widely on how they feel and react when conflict occurs.
- Some people have very low tolerance for conflict discomfort, while others have a much higher tolerance.
- Work to avoid the extremes of “Conflict Avoidance” or being “Conflictual-Argumentative.”

Handling Conflict: Conflict Avoidant

- Seeks to avoid an argument.
- While this may be a good quality in many situations, these individuals may also avoid bringing up important issues.
- If you tend to be “conflict avoidant,” you will need to practice speaking in a firm and direct manner.
Handling Conflict: Argumentative

• May tend to occasionally provoke arguments.
• While you will always know where these individuals stand, they may speak words harshly or put others down.
• If you tend to be “Conflictual or Argumentative,” you will need to practice holding your tongue.

Handling Conflict: Rate Yourself

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict–Avoidant</th>
<th>Speaking the Truth in Love</th>
<th>Conflictual - Argumentative</th>
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How Jesus Dealt With Conflict

• Sometimes He was **silent or said few words**.
  • As He was before Pilate in Matthew 27:11-14 or when the woman was caught in adultery in John 8:3-11.

• Other times He **spoke quite firmly and directly**.
  • As He did to the Pharisees in Matthew 23.

• Jesus always **spoke to the heart** of the matter and always focused on the other person’s eternal good.
  • As He did with the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-22.

See how Jesus spoke with the Pharisees *(Matthew 15:1-12)*

Jesus did not avoid conflict due to fear of man

and

He did not seek to be argumentative out of pride or selfishness.

Handling Conflict: No Magic Formula

• No right answer exists for every situation.
• Match your response to the **needs** of the situation and your spouse.
• Sometimes remaining silent or saying few words is best while other situations will require loving confrontation.

Events and Issues

What are we really talking about?
Events and Issues: Definition

- There are two layers to most conversations:
  - **Events** – the topic at hand.
  - **Issues** – the “under-the-surface” feelings, meanings, and goals.
- Example of the toilet paper roll:
  - For example, a couple may have an argument about whether the toilet paper roll is supposed to “go over or under.”
  - While on the surface they may both be talking about the toilet paper roll, the hidden issue may be related to something very different.
  - The unspoken issue may actually be “This is the way we did it in my family,” or “You never listen to my ideas.”

Events and Issues: Seek Common Ground

- Always seek to communicate on the same issue.
- Many conflicts are never solved because the spouses are actually arguing about different hidden issues.
- It is a loving act (though challenging) to work at understanding why your spouse is reacting to an issue the way he / she is.

Types of Conflict

**Solvable or Perpetual?**

**Solvable**
- Situational
- Less intense, simply about the topic.
- A solution can be found and maintained.
- Solvable topics for one couple can be perpetual for another couple.

**Perpetual**
- Centers on fundamental differences in personality or lifestyle.
- Generally more intense, deeper meaning behind position.
- The conflict keeps coming up.

Conflict: Perpetual Problems

- When choosing to marry a particular person, you will inevitably be choosing a particular set of unsolvable problems you will be dealing with for the rest of your life
- One researcher suggests that 69% of conflicts within marriage are unsolvable.
- Not addressing perpetual conflict can lead to gridlock and emotional disengagement.

Conflict: Perpetual vs. Solvable

**Solvable**
- Flooding (feeling overwhelmed)
- Problems seen as severe
- Best to handle problems alone
- Parallel lives
- Loneliness

**Perpetual**
- Centers on fundamental differences in personality or lifestyle.
- Generally more intense, deeper meaning behind position.
- The conflict keeps coming up.

Conflict: Cascade Toward Isolation

- The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work (Gottman and Silver, 2015)
For years Betty has been arguing with her husband, James, that he drives too fast. He always tells her that he's never had an accident and he's just an assertive driver. She ends up yelling at him, calling him selfish, and telling him that he doesn't care that his speeding scares her. He responds, in a frustrated manner, that the real problem is her lack of trust in him. Each time they have this argument they feel more frustrated, hurt, and entrenched in their positions.

The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work (Gottman and Silver, 2015)

“Every morning they (Rachel and Jason) commute together from their suburban home to downtown Pittsburgh. She thinks he drives too fast. He says he has to speed because she takes so long to get ready and he doesn’t want to be late to work. Rachel says it takes her so long in the morning because he showers first and takes forever. Plus, he always leaves the breakfast dishes on the table. While she’s busy washing them, he’s honking the horn for her to hurry.”

The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work (Gottman and Silver, 2015), p. 143

- Acknowledge the problem and talk about it.
- Seek to approach the problem with good humor.
- Remember that negative emotions are important and hold information about how to love each other better.
- Seek to understand each other’s subjective realities.
- Communicate acceptance of your spouse.
- Don’t forget to continue to build friendship within your marriage.

The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work (Gottman and Silver, 2015)

Caution: Handle with Care

Deal with anger and hurt proactively. Don’t deny it, “stuff” it, or let it turn to bitterness.
- Ephesians 4:26-27 “Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: neither give place to the devil.”
- Hebrews 12:15 “Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.”

Anger: Be Proactive

Anger: A Secondary Emotion

- Emotional Hurt (embarrassment, rejection, etc.)
- Frustration
- Fear
- Physical Pain
- Injustice/Sin (Righteous anger)

adapted from The Anger Workbook (Dr. Les Carter and Dr. Frank Minirth, 1993)
**Anger: Unhealthy/Healthy Ways to Handle**

**Unhealthy**
1. Suppress it
2. Be Aggressive
3. Be Passive-Aggressive

**Healthy**
1. Be Assertive / Direct with Respect
2. Drop It

Adapted from The Anger Workbook (Dr. Les Carter and Dr. Frank Minirth, 1983)

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**Rate Your Level of Anger/Tension**

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**Anger: Zone Suggestions**

- **In the Red Zone (7-10):**
  - Don’t try to figure out any problems right now.
  - Take steps to calm your body down such as going for a walk, writing out your feelings, engaging in a calming activity, and taking deep breaths.

- **In the Yellow Zone (4-6):**
  - Be aware you can quickly move into the Red Zone so pay attention and work to stay calm.

- **In the Green Zone (1-3):**
  - Ideally, we would always talk to each other from here.
  - It is the best place to be able to communicate in Christ-likeness and with our spouse’s best interest in mind.

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**Signs Of Unhealthy Conflict**

**Warning Lights on the Dashboard**

- **Positive Override**
  - Positive thoughts about each other and your marriage that are so pervasive they supersede negative feelings.
  - Spouses tend to attribute temporary negative emotion to a fleeting problem.

- **Negative Override**
  - Irritation, anger and resentment erode friendship.
  - Things begin to be interpreted in a negative manner.
  - Words said in a neutral tone of voice are taken personally.

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**Unhealthy Conflict: Sentiment Override**

**Positive Override**
- Positive thoughts about each other and your marriage that are so pervasive they supersede negative feelings.
- Spouses tend to attribute temporary negative emotion to a fleeting problem.

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**Unhealthy Conflict: Warnings**

- Avoid speaking quickly and angrily. Criticism, sarcasm, and put-downs are hurtful to your marriage.
  - **Proverbs 15:1** “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.”
  - **James 3:5** “Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth!”

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The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work (Gottman and Silver, 2015)
One researcher identified types of negative interactions that can be poisonous to marriages, he calls them the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.”

In fact, the chronic presence of the Four Horsemen in a marriage predicts divorce by 82%!

Criticism:
- Global negative statements about your spouse’s character or personality.
- **Example** – “Why are you so forgetful? I hate having to always sweep the kitchen floor when it’s your turn. You just don’t care.”
- Instead of criticism, seek to use a complaint.
  - **Complaint** includes 1) Here’s how I feel; 2) About a very specific situation; 3) Here’s what I need/want/prefer.
  - **Example** – “I’m really frustrated that you didn’t sweep the kitchen last night. We agreed that we’d take turns. Could you please do it now?”

Contempt:
- Words or gestures that show your spouse you are disgusted and repulsed by him/her.
- Sarcasm, cynicism, ridicule, name-calling, mocking, disregard, hostile humor, etc.
- Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about your spouse.
- Instead of contempt, seek to build a culture of appreciation and respect.

Defensiveness:
- Instead of listening to your spouse’s position and talking through it, defensiveness is essentially saying, “The problem isn’t me, it’s you.”
- Innocent victim, making excuses, cross complaining, saying, “yes, but…”
- Instead of defensiveness, seek to accept responsibility, even if only for part of the conflict.
  - **Defensiveness**: “It’s not my fault that we’re always late, it’s your fault.”
  - **Antidote**: “Well, part of this is my problem, I need to think more about time.”

Stonewalling:
- Avoiding your spouse by shutting him or her out and not communicating (i.e, remaining silent and look down or away).
- This takes time to show up and is the result of becoming overwhelmed with frequent negativity.
- While the intent of this is generally to avoid fighting, it also avoids the marriage.
  - **Antidote**: Seek ways to calm yourself and move from “red zone” to “green zone.”
Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing.

1 Peter 3:8-9

God Takes Abuse Seriously

1 Corinthians 5:11 “But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a raile, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.”

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.”

What is “Railing?”

“abuse, railing, reviling”
- From Vines: Greek meaning of the words loiodoria (Noun; NT:3059) & loidoros (Adj; NT:3060) used in the New Testament (Vines) for rail, raile, railing
- "(1) Clamoring with insulting language; uttering reproachful words. (2) Expressing reproach; insulting; as a railing accusation. 2 Peter 2.”
- Webster 1828 definition of reviling
- “(1) To subject to verbal abuse, (2) To use abusive language”
- Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary definition of revile

Abuse: Sin

- Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse are never acceptable and should not be tolerated in your marriage.
- Abuse is sin.
  - It strikes at the very heart of the marriage and provides Satan with an opportunity to destroy individuals, marriage, and families.
  - If abuse of any kind is occurring in your relationship, seek help immediately.

Abuse: Emotional

- Emotional abuse is also called verbal, psychological, and/or mental abuse.
- While physical abuse may cause visible bruises, emotional abuse crushes a person’s spirit.
  - Proverbs 18:21 “Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.”

Abuse: Emotional

- While considered the most common form of abuse, it is the hardest to identify.
- Characteristics:
  1. Chronic pattern.
  2. May be hurtful words, anger outbursts, silence, gestures, threats, shaming, put downs, etc.
  3. Used to control and manipulate a spouse.
- It can occur when a spouse uses spiritual-sounding language to dominate, control and/or demean the other spouse.
Abuse: Other Forms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Power</th>
<th>Intimidation</th>
<th>Economic Abuse</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| • Denies basic rights  
• Deprives of personal life  
• Mandates duties  
• Controls everything | • Uses looks, actions, gestures, and voice to cause fear | • Makes spouse ask for money  
• Requires spouse to account for money spent as a way to control. |

Abuse: Other Forms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humiliation</th>
<th>Isolation</th>
<th>Silence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Hostile Humor  
• Publicly humiliates | • Controls what is done, who is seen, who is talked to  
• Degrades appearance, skills, or cooking | • Uses silence as a weapon  
• Does not talk  
• Does not express emotion |

Abuse: Other Forms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Abuse</th>
<th>Property Violence</th>
<th>Sexual Abuse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Biting, choking, grabbing, hitting, pinching, or smothering | • Punches walls  
• Destroys property  
• Breaks down doors  
• Throws things to intimidate | • Treats as sex object  
• Interrupts sleep for sex  
• Forces sex |

Ground Rules For Conflict Resolution

Conflict Resolution & Problem Solving

Conflict Resolution: Ground Rules

- **Stay on one topic:**  
  • Trying to resolve multiple issues in one conversation can lead to misunderstandings and add confusion.

- **Don’t dredge up the past:**  
  • Bringing up past words, actions, etc. can be very hurtful to your spouse and damage trust.

- **Avoid “You” statements:**  
  • Starting a sentences with accusations (even if they are true) will put your spouse on the defensive (“You never listen”).

Conflict Resolution: Ground Rules

- **Use “I” statements:**  
  • Speak from your perspective. “I feel frustrated when the garbage isn’t taken out after I have asked you to take care of it.”

- **Control the tone of your voice:**  
  • Proverbs 15:1 “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.”

- **Seek first to understand:**  
  • Negative emotions hold important information about how to love your spouse better.
Conflicts Resolution: Good Problem Solving

1. Find an appropriate time and setting to discuss the issue. (Ecc 3:1)
2. Decide what issue is going to be discussed.
3. Define the type of conflict – solvable or perpetual.
4. Define the problem clearly – from both points of view.
5. State what you can agree on.
7. With an attitude of mutual submission, summarize, compromise, and agree upon a plan of action to try.
8. Pray to God for help to take the necessary steps and make progress.

Personal / Couple Reflection Questions

- What was most surprising (or most impactful) to you about this part of the presentation?
- Where do you fall on the continuum from “conflict avoidant” to “conflictual/argumentative”? What do you think this says about how we are likely to respond to conflict as a couple?