

Conflict in Marriage
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Today I want to address an issue that everyone will face at one time or another – conflict. Maybe you’ve had that terrible feeling you get in your stomach when conflict shows its face. I remember when I was in the third grade and one of my classmates said, “Meet me at the park after school so I can beat you up.” I searched for any and every reason to stay away from that kid for days. He harassed me at school until I finally showed up to receive my beating. Sometimes conflict ends this way – it doesn’t go well for us. We have become trained to avoid conflict. But a significant portion of God’s word addresses the conflicts that early Christians had with one another. The truth is that conflict in life is unavoidable. Just like I had to face up to that bully in third grade, we have to face the problems and difficulties that arise in life. So as we continue our sermon series entitled Towards a Loving Marriage today we have the chance to redeem this topic of conflict. We want to see what God has to say about how we should fight with one another. We want to explore what it means to be clothed in Christ in the midst of conflict. We will discover how, specifically in marriage, as we resolve conflict we can be drawn into deeper intimacy with one another as husband and wife.

Now for those of you who are not married I have good news. Our Bible passages for today do not specifically address marriage, they are instead about growing in Christ like character, so the principles that we want to apply to conflict in marriage are actually also very useful for the conflict that we face in other arenas of life.

We shouldn't have to stretch very far to see how God desires his followers to honor him when conflict occurs at work, with friends, or even on Sunday afternoons when the **Vikings** are getting creamed by the Packers.

So let's dig into God's word together. You can follow along with the outline I've provided. We begin by learning the rules of fighting fair. James gives us incredibly practical advice. In fact the book of James is filled with this kind of teaching. If you are new to reading the Bible or new to faith, James is a great place to begin reading. James says, "**Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.**" **James 1:19** We can easily turn this verse in James into a communication technique when it comes to fighting fair with our spouse, but there is a grander view that God wants to teach us. It is this: **Say "No" to your old self and "Yes" to your new self.** Listen to what James says: "be quick to listen." This is the very opposite of what our tendencies are when conflict arises. I know that when my wife and I have a disagreement, my practice is to win her over. I become the aggressor, making my points and showing her the error of her thinking. I want to be active and take the conflict head on to fix the problem. But James says that this approach does not "**bring about the righteous life that God desires.**" **James 1:20.** He instead gives us a picture of the character of quiet patience and humility that Jesus embodied.

In all of the counseling that our pastoral staff does with a wide variety of people, there are some common problems that bubble to the surface. Anger is one of these problems. This is the very issue that James is addressing. Anger is an absolutely divisive issue in a

marriage. If one partner is struggling to control their anger, then the relationship begins to breakdown whenever a disagreement occurs. Conflict then leads to this couple growing apart rather than growing closer. James admonition to “**be slow to anger**” is one aspect of putting on the character of Christ that lays the foundation for fighting fair. When we are able to remove anger from our times of conflict resolution it opens up our lines of communication and creates a safe environment to listen to one another. This is what it means to say “yes” to your new self. Paul describes it this way in Ephesians “**You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your *old self*, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the *new self*, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” Ephesians 4:22. Imagine how the ground rules for fighting fair with your spouse can change when the central image that you focus on is the true righteousness and holiness of God. Suddenly conflict in marriage can become redemptive and life-giving rather than something that we want to avoid. Rather than fearing an angry spouse we can look forward to working out our differences in the confines of a marriage covenant where Christ’s grace is making us into new persons day after day.**

The second rule of fighting fair is to **speak with kindness and speak for yourself**. We learn this rule from Paul’s words in Ephesians where he says “**Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.**” Ephesians 4:29 On their wedding day a young bride and

groom are so overjoyed to be marrying the one they love, they are so infatuated with how perfect their partner is, they are so hopelessly lost in the romantic moments together that they can hardly imagine ever saying an unkind word to one another. But over time many couples lose the sense of excitement, romance, or love and it is replaced by the ordinary, mundane, and routine in their marriage. It then becomes easy to replace kindness with criticism. I know that I've been guilty of saying unkind words to my wife under the guise of saying things that are true. I'll use truth as an excuse to convey my criticism.

Last year a Canadian humor writer named Phil Callaway took a challenge to go one year without telling a lie, fudging the truth, or stretching a story. He chronicles his journey into truth telling in his book entitled ***To Be Perfectly Honest***. I haven't read the book so I can't recommend it to you, but *Christianity Today* recently interviewed Callaway about what he learned from this experiment. Callaway said that he really annoyed his wife for the first two months of his experiment until he came up with an acronym for truth-telling. **T-H-I-N-K**. Is it True? Is it Helpful? Does it Inspire? Is it Necessary? Am I Kind about it? I find this idea to be very motivating in how I want to talk to my wife. It is certainly a check to be sure that I not let any unwholesome talk come out of my mouth. And listen to why Paul warns us about unwholesome talk, **“That it may benefit those who listen.”** The very reason that I speak with kindness in the midst of conflict is for my wife's benefit.

Speaking with kindness is only half of this rule of fighting fair. The second half is to speak for yourself. Paul writes, **“Get rid of**

all...slander.” Ephesians 4:31. When we find ourselves in the midst of conflict we have a tendency to turn the focus away from our own behavior, expectations, or desires and turn the focus toward our partner’s bad habits, negative attitudes, or inaction. When Paul tells us to get rid of all slander, he means words that are abusive, vilifying or defaming. How often have you caught yourself in a moment of weakness saying something that you regretted? Paul’s warning to avoid slander is meant to turn our attention away from words that destroy and toward words that build up and encourage.

The final lesson in the rules to fighting fair is to **remember the foundation of your love.** We are taught about love from our earliest moments in life. My three year old daughter Hannah will tell you all of the things that she loves. She loves her dolls, her blanket, she loves watching Dora the Explorer, if she’s in the right mood she even loves her little sister. Seeing the world through a three year old’s eyes can help us to understand false love and true love. Hannah really likes her baby doll, but she doesn’t love it. This is false love. Her doll is fun to play with and Hannah has a kind of childish infatuation with it. But the true love in Hannah’s life comes through her relationship with her parents, her sister, and her grandparents. When it comes to marriage we sometimes replace true love with this kind of false love. This leads to disastrous results, like when a husband has an affair with a woman he works with, or when a wife spends tens of thousands of dollars because she’s become addicted to shopping. False love tears marriages apart, because it leads to misplaced priorities. False love tells us lies. I remember a counseling session I had with a young man. I asked him what he loved about his fiancé.

Without hesitation he said, “She’s smoking hot!” This demonstrated false love. And the news I had for my young friend is that after 50 years of marriage, none of us are going to be smoking hot anymore. But he can discover true beauty in giving the greatest years of his life sacrificing his life for a woman he truly loves.

The foundation of true love is found in Paul’s words as he says **“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” Ephesians 4:30.** This verse does not use the word love, but it helps us to understand the foundational place that our relationship with God has in the midst of marriage. When conflict comes into marriage it helps to remember the ground rule of where we place God in our marriage. I’ve been helped by a simple diagram that a friend once drew for me on a **cocktail napkin.** He explained to me that as a husband and wife grow closer to Jesus, they are actually growing closer to one another in spiritual and emotional intimacy. You may be able to infer that the opposite is also true. If a husband or wife forgets that the foundation of marital love is the self-sacrificing love of God that is most clearly demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, then the marriage foundation begins to slowly erode. This isn’t a new idea. At the wedding of Princess Elizabeth in 1947 the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Geoffrey Francis Fisher said, **“The ever living Christ is here to bless you. The nearer you keep him, the nearer you will be to one another.”**

The strikingly phrased warning that Paul gives not to “grieve the Holy Spirit of God” is unique to Ephesians. Elsewhere in the New Testament we are warned not to quench the Spirit and not to

disregard God who gives his Holy Spirit in 1 Thessalonians while the book of Acts speaks of resisting the Holy Spirit. Paul's thought here of grieving the Holy Spirit seems to take up the idea of **Isaiah 63:10** **"Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit."** The language helps us to understand that God is saddened or disappointed when we rebel against God to hurt one another in anger, rage or bitterness.

Understanding rules for fighting fair can help us to navigate the difficult waters of conflict, but that is only the beginning. The next area we want to look at is how to build intimacy through conflict. First we have to consider if this is even possible. I believe that it is because I've seen it happen in couples that I've counseled and in my own marriage. Deeper intimacy is possible because of the nature of conflict. When a husband and wife are having a disagreement it is because each of them has a deep sense of their values, beliefs, dreams, expectations, or goals. Somewhere their hopes for the relationship are coming up short. This creates the conflict. When we enter into discovering the deepest longings of one another's heart, we are growing in intimacy with one another. When we engage conflict clothed in Christ we can actually deepen our sense of intimacy with our spouse. Paul describes this in Ephesians when he says **"Be kind and compassionate to one another."** **Ephesians 4:32.** This is the first way to build intimacy through conflict. **Live out the "one anothers" of God's word.** There are over 50 such commands in the Bible that use this phrase "one another". They give great practical instruction such as: **(Include a listing on one slide) "Be at peace with one another" Mark 9:50, "Love one another" John 13:14, "Be of the same mind toward one another" Romans 12:16,**

“When you come together to eat, wait for one another” 1 Corinthians 11:33, “Through love, serve one another” Galatians 5:13, “Regard one another as more important than yourselves” Philippians 2:3, “Confess your sins to one another” James 5:16, and many more.

When we have our spouse in mind rather than our own agenda of winning the argument or making our point, then we can begin to build greater intimacy with one another. Living out the “one another’s” of the Bible can be a simple reminder to change our attitude in the heat of an argument. I used to coach tennis. Famous tennis player Andre Agassi wrote in his autobiography that **“Tennis is the loneliest of all sports.”** As a tennis player you are not on a team, you are by yourself. Tennis players can have coaches, but there is no coaching allowed during matches, so as a tennis coach it was always my goal to teach a tennis player to be able to self-correct during a match. One trick that we tennis coaches would use is to teach our players certain “mantras”. Most of the mistakes that players make are repeated offences that they will do over and over again. So a “mantra” like “hit up” keeps a player from hitting into the net or we might teach you to say “feet first” in your mind during a match if you have problems with footwork. These little mental sayings would help players to self-coach during a match. I still use my own mantras while I’m playing tennis. So, maybe there is a certain Biblical “one another” that can help you to get beyond the content of your disagreement in marriage and to focus on knowing your spouse on the deepest level possible. Personally I like **“Greet**

one another with a kiss of love.” 1 Peter 5:14. That seems to solve all of my conflict.

The second way to build intimacy through conflict is to **allow forgiveness to reign in your life.** Paul says **“Forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” Ephesians 4:32.** Forgiveness is one of the grand narratives of the entire Bible. It is a theme that stretches across the story of God in human history. Forgiveness is needed to restore a broken relationship with God and it is just as needed to mend the brokenness that happens in our interpersonal relationships. Because marriage allows us the greatest capacity to become vulnerable with another person, it also provides the greatest potential to be hurt. This is what makes forgiveness such a powerful tool for building intimacy in the midst of conflict. Our vulnerability with our spouse creates an emotional and spiritual connection that is built up over days and weeks and months and years and decades of forgiving one another.

Forgiveness not only serves the partner who was offended, but it also serves the one who committed the offense because it allows us to release the bitterness that can build up in our hearts toward one another. This is why forgiveness is at the very center of Jesus’ teaching on prayer. **“Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.” Matthew 6:12.** Notice how Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness has a reciprocal quality. We entreat God to forgive us, but only in the same way that we’ve forgiven others.

We are taught forgiveness from our earliest days. It doesn’t always go well for parents teaching their children. I remember being forced to apologize to my sisters for something that I had done. My

parents were looking for a heartfelt apology and they would get nothing close to it from me. I would say “I’m sorry.” But I was thinking “I’m sorry I got caught, and when I do this to you again I won’t let you squeal to mom and dad.”

Forgiveness doesn’t always come easy. That’s why to build intimacy through the conflict resolution process we don’t just have to forgive one another, we have to let forgiveness reign in our lives. This means that I’m going to commit to my wife to not hold any past difficulties against her. The value that I place on forgiveness will be the very highest that I can give.

The final step to build intimacy through conflict is to **become known by your beloved**. I’ve chosen this phrase very carefully. It does not say “know your spouse” or “get to know your partner”. Becoming known is different than the action of getting to know someone. Your part in becoming known by your beloved is to create a place of safety within your marriage where you can share in the most authentic and vulnerable way. Many of the practices of avoiding conflict that society teaches us build up walls between husband and wife. When we strive to become known we are intentionally inviting our partner inside the walls that protect us from being hurt.

You may have also noticed that I’ve used a different term to talk about your spouse or partner. “Beloved” is a term that expresses our strongest emotion toward another person. The disciple named John was called Jesus’ beloved disciple. They had a special friendship that Jesus didn’t share with the other disciples. God has designed the marriage covenant to also reflect this sense of special closeness. Especially when conflict comes, our marriages will be strengthened if

we are able to turn toward our spouse and embrace them as our beloved.

Today we've spent some time considering how to fight fair and how to grow closer during conflict. You may be in a marriage where you feel like you are far from an ideal place when conflict arises. Many couples feel stuck in how they fight, so they avoid conflict. This may be an area where it is time to get some help. The pastoral staff of Autumn Ridge are here to help. We may be able to pair you with a seasoned couple who can serve as marriage mentors. You might want a reference to a professional Christian counselor. I've seen many couples who have improved how they handle conflict just by fighting in front of a pastor. Sometimes it only takes a third party to ask the right questions or make a few observations to set you on the right path. But we want you to know that conflict in marriage is normal. The goal is not to end conflict altogether, but to be clothed in Christ before, during and after your conflict.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, you've given us an amazing gift in the marriage covenant. Sometimes we struggle to follow your covenant and we fail one another as husband and wife. Lord, where couples are hurting I pray that you would embolden them to confess to one another and turn back to following your plan for their marriage. Holy Spirit, you are our counselor and we pray that you would counsel marriages that need your wisdom when the temperature rises. Help us to learn to fight fair and to love one another as you love us even when we disagree. Lord, we pray for those who are in conflict in other areas of life beyond marriage. We ask that your hand of reconciliation and

peace would rule areas of strife. God we pray that you would equip marriage mentors to encourage young marriages in our congregation. Father, we ask for your blessing on the mission team that will be leaving this week for Kosova, we pray that you would bless their work spiritually and that it would produce a harvest. Lord we pray for those in our congregation who are struggling physically or have been hospitalized. We pray for strength for Les Cookman. We pray for Josh Sorenson who is in need of your healing touch after a terrible motor cycle accident. We pray for those who are struggling physically thinking especially of Ann Pick, Jim Benson, and Pat Berg. Father, we ask for your peace for Tom Baird and his family on the death of Tom's mother Marjorie. Father, we ask for your hand of mercy to be upon Bruce who is the dear friend of one of our supported missionaries. Bruce was kidnapped this week in a closed country that is not friendly to Christians. God, we ask that you would protect Bruce's life and bring him home safely. Lord, we ask for your peace for Dan and Dawn Bergen as they've said goodbye to their foster daughter Lizzy. We ask that you would give Lizzy comfort and strength in the days and weeks ahead. Lord as we present our offerings to you now we thank you that some of this money will be used to encourage marriages that are struggling. We ask that you would continue to strengthen our marriage ministry and help us discover new ways to empower husbands and wives to live for you. We thank you for your faithfulness to your covenant love for us. We pray in Jesus holy name, Amen.