

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE — PARTICIPANT’S GUIDE

LESSON 9 — CONFLICT

BIG IDEA

Conflict is something we all experience (regularly), but often handle in very fleshly ways. The gospel gives us a pattern and a means to healthy conflict resolution.

NOTES:

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LESSON 9 ARTICLE — THE GOSPEL HELPS US FIGHT FAIRLY

We have seen that as the gospel renews us internally, it also flows out of us to bring renewal to our relationships. Nothing is more common to relationships than conflict. If the gospel is not affecting the way we deal with conflict, then it's probably not touching us very deeply! In this article, we will consider how the gospel helps us fight fairly.

Think of the most recent fight you've had. Perhaps the conflict was with your spouse, a family member, or a work associate. Now, set aside the circumstances of the argument (what the issue was, how it made you feel, who was right or wrong) and take a moment to ponder your actions during the conflict. Your behavior probably falls into one of two categories.

Some people are **attackers**. They like to be on the offensive. They place a high value on justice, so it matters greatly to them who is right and who is wrong. Below are signs that you might be an attacker.

- » You deal with anger or frustration by “venting” it.
- » You argue your case passionately.
- » You ask questions like “How do you know?” and “Can you prove that?”
- » You want to fight until the fight is over.
- » You cross-examine like a lawyer in order to “get to the heart of the conflict.”
- » Winning the argument is more important than loving the opponent.
- » You turn the argument to focus on the other person, even if it began with you as the focal point.

On the other end of the spectrum are **withdrawers**. People with this tendency often find themselves on the defensive. They tend to avoid or ignore conflict and, when pressed into an argument, they respond in sullen silence or apathetic passivity. If you're a withdrawer, here are some patterns you might recognize:

- » You deal with anger or frustration by suppressing it.
- » You have opinions but keep them to yourself in order to “keep the peace.”
- » You ask questions like, do we have to talk about this now? and does it matter?
- » You'd rather avoid a fight than win one.

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» You sometimes physically leave an argument in order to “get some space.”

These are typical ways we respond to disagreement, frustration, offense, or hurt. The fact that these responses are considered “normal” (i.e. natural) is a clue that they may not be biblical (i.e. supernatural).

How, then, do we move toward resolving conflict in a biblical manner? Let's learn from the disagreement between Paul and Peter in Galatians 2. This quarrel arose as the early church was expanding beyond Jerusalem and many Gentiles were being converted to faith in Jesus. The Jewish Christians imported some of their traditional practices into their worship of Jesus. The Gentiles, on the other hand, had no allegiance to Jewish customs like circumcision or dietary regulations.

Peter, a Jew, understood the gospel well enough to embrace the new Gentile believers with no strings attached (Acts 10:9–48). But his application of the gospel got tested when he found himself in mixed company. Some legalistic Jewish teachers from Jerusalem had begun to impose Jewish customs and laws on Gentile converts. When these teachers came to Antioch, where Peter was fellowshiping and eating with Gentiles, Peter began to separate himself from the Gentiles.

Peter's attempt to appease the legalistic Jews compounded the problem because it implied that he agreed with their beliefs. Eventually, even Barnabas followed suit. The two men had fallen into hypocrisy, professing to be one with the Gentiles in Christ, yet acting in ways that destroyed that unity.

As he observed this behavior, Paul knew he could not ignore or withdraw from the situation. The stakes were too high. But he also had to approach it in the right way. “Flying off the handle” wasn't going to bring about the kind of reconciliation he wanted. Though this passage does not give all the details, its description of Paul's interaction with Peter is a good example of a gospel-centered approach to conflict.

But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I [Paul] opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to [Peter] before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Gal. 2:11–14 ESV)

Note these aspects of Paul's actions:

PAUL APPROACHED PETER PUBLICLY. He didn't avoid Peter, gossip about him, or try to bully him. He confronted him, going directly to the person with whom he had the conflict. In this case the confrontation was public. This isn't always necessary, but since the sin was public and had far-reaching consequences, Paul made sure the confrontation fit the situation.

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PAUL’S MOTIVATION WAS NOT SELF-DEFENSE OR SELF-INTEREST BUT THE DEFENSE OF THE GOSPEL. “Their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14). Paul’s concern for the gospel and relationships in the church body outweighed the temptation to either attack or withdraw.

PAUL PRESENTED THE ISSUE PLAINLY AND INVITED A RESPONSE FROM PETER. “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Gal. 2:14).

This sort of gospel-centered confrontation mirrors God’s movement toward us in the gospel. God did not pour out his wrath on us (attack) or remove his presence from us (withdraw). Instead, he sacrificially moved toward us in the person of Jesus, full of grace and truth. Jesus confronted sin, invited relationship, and provided a way of reconciliation. Thus, the gospel provides the pattern of biblical conflict resolution. We have a proper motivation (love), confidence (faith), and means for resolving conflict (grace and truth).

The gospel calls us to repent of our sinful patterns of attacking and withdrawing. And the gospel empowers us to move into conflict by faith, with a humble, confident, God-glorifying intentionality. We can forsake the “normal” way of doing things for the gospel way.

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LESSON 9 EXERCISE — GOSPEL-CENTERED CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The chart below outlines the differences between attacking and withdrawing and contrasts them with a gospel-centered approach to conflict. Not everything in this chart is going to resonate with every person or conflict, so focus on whichever descriptions are particularly relevant to you. The goal is to help you identify what is at the root of the unhealthy patterns of conflict in your life and to provide a clear path toward gospel resolution.

ASPECT	ATTACKING	WITH-DRAWING	GOSPEL
HEART FOUNDATION	Self-righteousness	Insecurity	Repentance, forgiveness
POWER SOURCE	Flesh, pride	Flesh, fear	The Holy Spirit
COMMITMENT	To be right	To avoid conflict	To understand & engage
DIRECTION	To argue or subdue	To deny or appease	To convey & invite
FEELING	Life is safe	Life is less painful	Life is challenging
GOAL	Self-protection	“Peace”	God’s glory, their good
RESULT	Hurt, divisiveness	Bitterness, separation	Healing, reconciliation

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How do you usually deal with conflict; do you tend toward attacking or withdrawing? Which descriptions above do you particularly identify with?

A GOSPEL-CENTERED APPROACH TO CONFLICT

Outlined below is a process of dealing with conflict in a gospel-centered manner. Each aspect is listed, along with some questions that will help you assess your tendencies in that area. You may call to mind past experiences or even a current conflict with someone. Remember, the goal is to recognize unhealthy patterns in your life and to practice applying the gospel more effectively.

1. HEART FOUNDATION: Identify your tendency toward either self-righteousness or insecurity. Do you tend to be defensive, or blame others, or always think you are right (self-righteousness)? Do you tend to harbor anger or gossip, or stuff things to avoid confrontation (insecurity)? Confess these things as sin, to God and those involved.

2. POWER SOURCE: Acknowledge what drives your attacking or withdrawing. Are you concerned with losing face, being wrong, disrupting the peace, other's disapproval, etc? By faith, affirm your trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to free you from these sins of pride and fear.

3. COMMITMENT: Communicate to those involved that you want to seek resolution. To help with this, identify what else you tend to seek instead of resolution (being right, being "safe", comfort)? Reject these pursuits as false and destructive.

4. DIRECTION: As you engage the person you are having conflict with, talk honestly and respectfully about your thoughts and feelings, and invite the other party to do the same. Do you understand each other? What usually gets in the way of your understanding, or being understood (anger, argumentativeness, dishonesty, timidity, assumptions you make about others, etc.)?

5. FEELING AND GOAL: Talk about what it will cost each of you to resolve this conflict. Specify what steps need to be taken toward resolution. Pray for God's will to be done (his glory and each other's good). Ask him to enable you to pay the price of resolution, thanking him for paying the ultimate price of death to resolve the ultimate conflict of our sinful rebellion.