

Dealing With Conflict

Jean made it a point to do everything possible to stay out of conflict. If there was a disagreement, she would give into the other person rather than speak her mind or argue her point of view. If she walked into a room where she felt tension between people, she turned around and walked out. But often Jean was taken advantage of. She felt powerless and worthless and was becoming increasingly isolated. She felt that these negative results were a small price to pay for staying out of any kind of conflict.

One would have to leave this world to avoid conflict. It is inevitable in a fallen world. Not only can we not avoid it, but it would not be good to avoid all conflict. In fact, we need to learn to deal with conflict as part of the growth process. By avoiding conflict, Jean had stopped growing as a person.

Like any other skill, learning to deal effectively with conflict takes time and practice. Fear can be a significant deterrent in this area because dealing with conflict will require taking some risks. We must act in spite of the fear we feel. It is helpful to have a friend who is stronger in these matters to act as a guide, model and overall encourager. As you learn and experiment with healthier ways of handling conflict, you may be energized and empowered as you see the positive results of applying good principles of handling conflict.

This Pocket Principle is designed to help us begin to learn how to handle conflict. It will discuss healthy ways to approach conflict by looking at Biblical principles and how to apply those principles.

Understanding Biblical Principles

The following are nine principles drawn from Scripture which focus on dealing with conflict. They provide a basis for developing healthier relationships and also provide a mirror to look into so we can evaluate how we are doing.

1. **Work toward agreement or oneness.**
– Romans 12:18; John 17:22-23

... make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose (Philippians 2:2).

Paul appeals to the Philippians to work at developing agreement, not just being agreeable. The goal is not just being nice to each other. The goal is finding common ground to build on, and this will require the hard work of dealing with differences.

2. **Be careful what you say and how you say it.** – James 3:3-6; Ephesians 4:29

The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit (Proverbs 15:4).

The way we use our tongues, positively or negatively, has an immediate impact on every situation we are in. We can either bless and heal people or hurt and crush them with our tongue. We must exhibit self-control!

3. Be sensitive to the needs of others. – Philippians 2:3-4

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to his needs, that it might benefit those who listen (Ephesians 4:29).

This does not mean that we cannot be corrective in what we say. But we need to be motivated by what the other person needs and what is best for him when we are corrective.

4. Speak the truth in a loving manner. – Ephesians 4:15

People need truth and grace. To confront someone with the truth without grace and love can communicate condemnation. To just give a person grace and never confront him

with the truth may make the person feel good, but leave him blind to important issues in his life. We need to learn how to combine the two in a way that motivates a person to do something about his life without condemning him.

Speaking the truth in love means that we speak the truth because we care about another person without pressuring him to change. Manipulation, which is pressuring another person to change, is selfish and ineffective, and usually the person being manipulated rebels against it. We cannot change another person. Only God can. Instead of manipulating, we need to minister by speaking the truth in love and leaving the results to God. Ministry is not selfish. Usually the person senses love and concern and is more motivated to make the changes suggested.

5. Take the log out of your own eye first, before trying to correct another person. Matthew 7:1-6

We cannot expect another person to change when we are not willing to change ourselves. Although we do not need to be perfect before we talk with others about their faults, we do need to acknowledge and be working on our own issues.

6. Be willing to receive correction—Proverbs 12:1

He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever

heeds correction gains understanding (Proverbs 15:32).

We cannot expect someone to receive correction from us if we are not able to receive it. We must be an example of what we want to see in others.

7. **Stay under control when in a conflict.** – Proverbs 12:18; 14:29; 15:18; 16:32

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (Proverbs 15:1).

It is hard to stay in control when a conflict escalates. When the discussion is getting heated, it is time to take a break and cool down. It is important to inform the other person when you are ready to resume the discussion.

8. **Gain wisdom through the counsel of others.** – Proverbs 19:20

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed (Proverbs 15:22).

No one has 20/20 vision in a conflict. Involving an outside, objective observer is often helpful because he can see things more clearly and give helpful advice. He may give advice to one person or mediate between the two.

9. **Listen carefully before giving an answer.**

He who answers before listening –that is his folly and shame (Proverbs 18:13).

It is often helpful to repeat back to the other person the facts and feelings behind what he said before giving a response. This provides the other person with the opportunity to clarify what he said so you can be sure that you heard him right. Then you can give your point of view.

Applying Biblical Principles

Conflict is not only normal, but it may take one of many forms. We cannot cover how to deal with every form of conflict, but we can develop a set of guidelines that give guidance to the process of dealing with conflict in a healthy way. In the last section we tried to understand nine Biblical principles. In this section we are going to focus on applying those principles. Here are seven practical application principles.

1. **Emotions — If emotions become too intense, take a time-out.**

Someone needs to call for the time-out if emotions are too intense, and the other person needs to respect the right of another to take a time-out. Before separating, be sure that there is agreement about when to come back together and resume working on the problem.

There are several ways to cool down during the time-out that are effective. Doing some physical activity, writing about what is happening, talking to an objective, safe third party and/or praying are all good ways to calm down. When you are writing or talking with someone make sure to use emotion words to express yourself. Talk about what you are feeling. Figure out what is going on inside of you. Don't just condemn the other person. When you resume your conversation, you want to communicate how you are feeling.

Sometimes the other person is saying and doing things that are bringing up old feelings in you (from another situation) that have not been resolved but that have nothing to do with the current situation. The feelings from that old situation are being imported into this new situation. Ask yourself, "When have I felt this way before?" It is not fair to blame the other person for these feelings.

2. **Communication — Communicate feelings, not judgment.**

When we are trying to communicate with someone in a conflict situation, we

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should communicate feelings, not judgment. To do this, use "I" statements instead of "you" statements. Instead of saying, "You always yell

at me and you are wrong for doing that to me", it would be better to say, "I feel threatened when I hear you raise your voice." The "I" statement is not as provocative as the "you" statement. It shows the other person that what he is doing is having a negative affect on solving the disagreement.

Another helpful variation of the "I" statement is to include your perspective of what happened. Your perspective is your interpretation or impression of what happened. By doing this you have acknowledged that this is your interpretation and that your perception might be wrong. Obviously, your perception is biased and based on limited information. This gives the other person the opportunity to give another perspective, clarify the perspective or explain his intention. For example:

When I hear you talk very loudly, I
(objective fact)
understand it to mean that you are angry
(my interpretation)
and I feel threatened.
(my emotion)

3. **Stay on the subject. — Deal with only one issue at a time.**

When you are having an argument, it is easy to bring up other subjects, current or from the past, which are not relevant. This can be a way of avoiding the issue at hand, or it can be a way of badgering a person that produces guilt.

When one issue is dealt with at a time, the possibility of working out a solution is much higher. If there is another issue that needs to be resolved, bring it up at another time rather than sabotaging any hope of resolving the present problem.

Focus on the problem and not the person. It is usually helpful to show that you are talking about the issue and not the person by mentioning what you appreciate about the person in addition to talking about the problem.

4. **Negotiate a solution, if necessary.**

When there is disagreement on a decision that needs to be made, it is often helpful to negotiate a solution. In a negotiation, all parties need to state what they need and want. Next, possible solutions that take into account everyone's concerns should be presented. To get to an agreeable solution everyone usually needs to compromise to some degree. The goal is to find a "win-win" solution, not a "win-lose" or "lose-lose" solution. In some cases, the only solution is for one of the parties to give in. In that case, the losing party should have the opportunity to get their preference at a later date as way of creating fairness.

5. **Carry out consequences, if necessary.**

If there has been a serious offense which causes the conflict, it may be

necessary to state and carry out a set of consequences in order to effect change. For example, if one partner in a marriage has a severe drinking problem that is causing difficulties in the marriage, the other partner needs to first confront the problem. If the person with the problem is unwilling to admit or deal with the problem, then the other partner must provide consequences for the situation that are appropriate.

In a serious situation like this, an appropriate consequence would be a separation in the marriage until the person with the drinking problem has sought help and is effectively dealing with the problem. Certainly there are many different consequences that can be applied in various situations. It is important to choose one that is appropriate to the situation.

6. **Ask for help.**

If you are unable to resolve a conflict, don't be afraid to ask for help. We all need help at times. Be careful who you ask. Ask someone who is neutral, objective and has a proven track record helping people resolve conflicts. You may ask for personal help concerning what you should do, or you may ask someone to mediate between you and the person you are in conflict with. Before a person is called in to mediate, both parties in the conflict need to agree on who that person is and what his role will be.

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7. Stay current.

Staying current means that we need to deal with issues as they come up and not let them fester and become worse. Delaying dealing with issues does not cause them to go away. In fact, it usually causes them to get worse. If you have a water leak in your car and you ignore it, it will only get worse. The car will overheat, and overheating an engine can ruin it. In a similar way, putting off dealing with conflict usually leads to problems that are more difficult to fix than the original problem.

We need to be realistic. We will not be able resolve all conflicts. Since it takes two people who are willing to work on and solve a problem before there can be success, there may be a time when one person is ready to solve a problem but the other person is not. At this point, patience and waiting for God's timing and provision are necessary.

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Also, not all battles are worth fighting. We have to weigh the cost. For example, if confronting the boss might lead to being fired, you need to be willing to change jobs. Choose your battles carefully, and be willing to live with the consequences.

We need to remember that spiritual warfare is always a part of conflict (Ephesians 6:12). We should not blame everything on Satan. He is not that powerful. There are legitimate issues that people must face and resolve, but don't underestimate Satan's behind the scenes tactics. He loves to create chaos, divide people, and make bad things worse, especially for Christians. He and his demons lie to, confuse, threaten, and blame believers in order to create problems. There have been many times when there have been problems between my wife and me (Jack) that have immediately dissipated after I have rebuked Satan. Usually these are simple misunderstandings that are easily cleared up.

Summary

Dealing with conflict is never easy or comfortable, but it is extremely important. Not dealing with conflict is not really an option. By understanding and applying Biblical principles we can constructively deal with conflict. Successfully dealing with conflict is one of the marks of a person who is growing into maturity in Christ.

Application Suggestions:

- Think back over the last conflict you had. What did you do well? What areas do you need to improve in?

- Discuss these principles with someone you have a close relationship with and mutually agree that this is the way you want to handle conflicts in the future.