

LESSON 11

Handling Conflict

How we handle conflict is usually determined by what we believe about conflict. The following “agree-disagree” exercise will give you a starting point for this lesson. Put a mark on either the “agree” or “disagree” line that best indicates your response to each statement. You will find answers to these statements as you progress through this lesson.

Agree Disagree

1. ___ ___ Conflict is usually wrong, especially among Christians.
2. ___ ___ Conflict is evidence that something is seriously wrong.
3. ___ ___ Direct confrontation is the best way to deal with conflict.
4. ___ ___ Nothing good ever comes from conflict.
5. ___ ___ Conflicts could be avoided if people were more spiritual.
6. ___ ___ There are seldom any winners in a conflict situation.

Following are some general observations about conflict. First, conflict is unavoidable. Jesus said that “in this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). Therefore, we should not be surprised when we find ourselves in conflict. As hard as we may try to avoid it, we will find ourselves in conflict. One reason for this may be that many of our conflicts are self-produced.

Second, conflict is difficult. It is normal to dislike conflict. There are some logical reasons why it is difficult to confront someone in a conflict situation. For instance, we dislike being rejected or disapproved of by others, even though we know it is probably going to happen anyway. We do not like being misunderstood or misrepresented by others, which we see as a challenge to our character and good intentions. We fear making things worse. We may know the situation

is bad but feel we can tolerate it. If we confront the other person, the conflict that erupts may become intolerable. We fear what is unknown or unfamiliar to us. Since we do not know how a conflict situation may turn out, we simply choose to avoid it. Furthermore, most of us lack confrontation skills, since we were never taught to confront a situation without becoming involved in heated conflict.

Third, conflicts are often symptoms of other serious problems. They may result from uncontrolled anger, low self-worth, unresolved issues from childhood or youth, an unforgiving attitude, or unmet needs and desires in our lives.

Fourth, how we handle conflict determines to a great extent our success in life. Conflict has the potential for producing joy or sorrow as well as spiritual growth in our lives. This being the case, it is important that we identify the wrong approaches people use in trying to handle conflict.

- Some take the win at any price approach. As a result, they often win the battle but lose the war.
- Some prefer peace at any price and choose to ignore the significance of the conflict or pretend the conflict does not exist. Their motto is hear no evil; see no evil.
- Still others spend all their time and energy complaining about the conflict, but take no positive steps to resolve it.
- Some prefer to withdraw from the conflict either by physically leaving the scene or by going into psychological isolation.
- Some try to handle conflict by engaging in gamesmanship, which involves changing the rules, keeping score and waiting for their turn to win.
- Others are ready to throw in the towel and give up at the first sign of unrest. Their approach is to quit and leave. Or they may feel it necessary to give in for the sake of keeping the peace. In doing so, they often repress their true feelings.
- Others constantly look for someone to blame for the conflict—be it the church, the pastor, the school, the boss, fellow workers, or the spouse.

- Others try to use their position and power to handle a conflict. They are quick to remind others of who they are and why their way is the only way to resolve the problem.

Fifth, conflict can be resolved. We can learn to handle conflict in a positive way if we use the right methods. That will be our aim as we progress through this lesson.

LESSON OUTLINE

Good Versus Bad Conflict

Common Causes of Conflict

What the Bible Says About Conflict

Handling Conflict

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Differentiate between constructive and destructive conflict.*
2. *Identify the common causes of conflict.*
3. *Discuss what the Bible says about conflict.*
4. *Indicate steps to take in handling conflict constructively.*

Good Versus Bad Conflict

Objective 1:

Differentiate between constructive and destructive conflict.

The dictionary uses some of the following terms to define conflict: to strike together; a clash or contention; discord, disharmony or friction; sharp disagreement or opposition regarding interest, ideas, values; a state of opposed wills; and emotional tension resulting from

incompatible inner needs or drives. Conflict is often the result of the differences two or more persons bring to a situation. Conflicts differ from quarrels. A quarrel can be defined as verbal strife in which angry emotions are barely in control, and in which the parties involved attack each other instead of the issue. The Bible makes allowance for occasional legitimate conflicts in our lives, but the following verses strongly forbid quarreling:

- “It is to a man’s honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel” (Proverbs 20:3)
- “As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife” (Proverbs 26:21).
- “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice” (Ephesians 4:31).
- “Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels” (2 Timothy 2:23).

Conflict can be destructive if used in the wrong way, or it can be helpful if used correctly. The basic differences between good conflict and bad conflict follow. Good conflict is constructive in that it can help clarify issues. Good conflict encourages and develops maturity as the people involved are forced to face themselves and each other as they really are. Good conflict can promote better communication. Good conflict can also be God’s way of teaching us humility, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Everyone needs to learn how to deal effectively with conflict.

Bad conflict is destructive in that it does not build relationships; it tears them down, especially when the parties involved attack one another rather than the issue. Bad conflict is characterized by accusations, threats, name-calling, and strident tones. Little by little personalities are destroyed, and at least one of the parties comes out beaten. As a result, the relationship is cheapened and companionship is demolished. Unresolved and destructive conflicts make a mess of lives.

Common Causes of Conflict

Objective 2:

Identify the common causes of conflict.

The experience of the early church in Acts 15 provides an excellent case study for predicting where conflicts will arise, how to solve them, and the benefits that result when they are solved correctly. The chapter recounts how the early church responded to the influx of new, non-Jewish converts. The Jewish Christians had insisted they be circumcised, but Paul and Barnabas felt otherwise. Anyone could see this situation contained potential causes of conflict. Below are some situations that produce conflicts among believers today.

Change

Here is a little experiment you can do: Fold your arms across your chest. Take note of which arm is on top. Now fold them the other way with the other arm on top. What are you feeling and thinking right now? What does this illustrate about change? Simply that we are all resistant to even the most simple changes. Someone observed that no one likes change except a wet baby. Here are some reasons why people resist change:

1. Change threatens security. The unknown and unfamiliar are frightening. Because the new and different may appear strange or uncomfortable, people prefer what is familiar because they like to know what to expect.
2. Change may threaten status or position. Vested interests may appear to be at stake. People are concerned that they will not hold the same position of respect or influence they had.
3. Change implies criticism of the past or present. New ideas may suggest dissatisfaction with the way things are being done now or that the old way is not good enough.
4. Change seems like additional work. Even though the new way of doing things may mean less effort

in the long run, the process of making the change may require more effort than is presently required.

5. Change may seem unnecessary or unhelpful. People may view the present situation as satisfactory or hopeless, but normal. The change may be resisted because it appears similar to another that was tried before without success.

Both positive and negative changes can cause conflict. For instance, the early church was undergoing tremendous changes as many Gentiles were receiving Christ. The makeup of the church was changing radically. So it was not unusual that conflicts would arise even in this great revival. The early church's experience is a model for today's church. The reality is that change, even positive change, makes people feel insecure. This insecurity leads to conflicts.

Differences

Think of all the differences confronting the members of the early church. It consisted of many racial, cultural, and ethnic groups. They came from different nations, spoke different languages, and practiced different religions. Such differences exist in the lives of the people with whom you associate today. Here are some of the ways people differ from one other:

1. Different convictions and values
2. Different approaches to logic and reasoning
3. Different decision-making styles
4. Different communication patterns
5. Different levels of spiritual growth
6. Different expectations and perspectives
7. Different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds
8. Different habits, needs, and wants

Stress

Amidst the excitement in the early church, there was a lot of stress, false teachings, opposition, and persecution. When people are under stress, there is

tendency for more conflicts to arise. Conflicts always involve people, so it helps to examine people to further understand the root of conflicts.

Self-centered People

American President Abraham Lincoln was once walking with his two sons, both of whom were crying. “What’s the matter with your boys?” a passerby asked. “Exactly what is wrong with the whole world,” Lincoln said. “I have three walnuts and each boy wants two.” People are just naturally selfish and want their own way. And when they do not get it, the end result can be discontent and conflict.

Divisive People

Some people are just prone to sowing discord. Often the conflict has nothing to do with you, but if they had problems with others, they will have a problem with you. Such people are problem mongers, and stirring up dissension makes them feel important. Others may have a hidden agenda or some other underlying issue that drives them.

Hurting People

Author John Maxwell is credited with popularizing the expression, “Hurting people hurt people.” When conflict arises, it is wise to understand where people are hurting. Other potential problem producers include breakdown in communication, self-centeredness, circumstances out of one’s control, reactive rather than proactive leaders, persons making unreasonable demands, and bad timing when making changes.

What the Bible Says About Conflict

Objective 3:

Discuss what the Bible says about conflict.

Learning from the Prodigal

Read Luke 15:25–32. Look for answers to the follow study questions as you read: What differences do you notice between the two sons in the story? How did

these differences lead to conflict? What causes of conflict do you find in this parable? In what way did the elder brother contribute to the conflict?

The parable of the prodigal son presents a typical scenario for conflict. The younger son is headstrong and foolish. He wastes all his resources on wild living and ends up in a pigpen. The older brother, on the other hand, is responsible and industrious. But when his brother returns home after squandering his resources, the older brother refuses to join in the celebration. Here are the makings of a conflict.

1. Anger boils to the surface. The elder brother is indignant that a party is being thrown for his no-good, squandering brother. Indignation turns to rage and accusations when his father comes out and entreats him to join in the festivities. Conflicts often erupt when anger gains control.
2. Self-righteousness rears its head. The elder brother considers himself a good guy because he did good things. But he fails to deal with deep-seated resentment and hatred. It is easy to feel so self-righteous when we find ourselves embroiled in a conflict.
3. Pride contributes to the conflict. The elder son considers the farm and everything on it his own—the result of his good management, rather than the result of his father’s love and generosity. Pride is the cause and continuance of most conflicts. We are too proud to say we are wrong or sorry.
4. Judgmentalism enters. As far as the elder son is concerned, his younger brother got what he deserved for abandoning the family. But the younger brother was not the only one who went to a far country. The elder brother did too; only his straying was not physical. The older brother was quietly feeding on the husks of anger, jealousy, pride, and insecurity. St. Augustine notes, “A darkened heart is the far country, for it is not by our feet but by our affections that we either leave God or return to Him.”

Learning from the Book of James

Read James 4:1–10. Look for answers to the following study questions as you read: What does James say are the causes of interpersonal conflict? What does he offer as the cure for conflict?

James gets right to the heart of the matter when he asks, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?” (4:1). Notice that wrong desires and motivations create interpersonal conflicts.

James 4:2 says, “You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.” We all want our needs met, and we yearn to enjoy nice things. This, in and of itself, is not evil. First Timothy 6:17 says that “God . . . richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” But those who base their contentment on what they have will never be happy, no matter how much they have. Someone once asked John Rockefeller, a famous American millionaire, how much money it takes to make people happy? His reply was, “Just a little bit more than they have.” Count on it—when pleasure becomes our primary goal, we will stir up conflict.

James 4:3 also observes, “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.” Most often those motives are driven by pride and a desire for prominence. Proverbs 13:10 says, “Pride only breeds quarrels.” Why is that? Because we are too proud to give in or admit we are wrong. James 4:6 continues, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Pride causes conflict with others and with God. To be in opposition to God is dangerous!

So if pride and misguided desires are the cause of arguments, then what is the solution? James sums up his answer in one phrase—“humble yourselves” (4:6, 10). The obvious antidote to pride is humility. “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up”

(James 4:10). James offers three steps we need to take in dealing with conflict.

First, we must surrender ourselves to God (James 4:7). Conflicts with people happen because we may have conflict on the inside. We do not get along with others because we are at war with God and ourselves. Colossians 3:15 says, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace." When we have the peace of Christ in our hearts, we will be at peace with ourselves and with others. The absence of this peace makes us want to manipulate and control others.

Second, learn to resist Satan. The second part of verse 7 says, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." The word *resist*, as used here, is a war term that means "to be prepared, to stand against or to withstand an attack." The devil wants to destroy you. Jesus said that "the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). Satan causes conflict, arguments, confusion, stress, hurt feelings, disappointment, anger, and chaos. How does he operate in a conflict situation? He plays on our pride. He whispers things like, "You do not have to put up with this. Who do they think they are? Come on, assert yourself." These are things our pride loves to hear. However, in those moments we must resist the devil by quoting the Word of God.

Third, get closer to God. James 4:8 beckons, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." How you manage conflict in your life is dependent on your relationship with God. When you spend time with the Lord, you get along better with others because He keeps your heart at peace and you are not as irritable. Isaiah 26:3 affirms that God will "keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in [God]." We get closer to God by spending time in His Word, talking with Him in prayer each day, going to church, getting involved in a Bible study, and so on.

Handling Conflict

Objective 4:

Indicate steps to take in handling conflict constructively.

The following are some steps you can take in handling conflict constructively. Most of these can be illustrated through the life of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son.

Do Not Ignore the Conflict

There are times when silence is not golden, but a conflict situation is not one of them. Opening up avenues of communication is essential in resolving conflict. Proverbs 25:11 says, "A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver."

Do Not Bottle Up Your Emotions

Ignoring the conflict leads to denial and bottling up one's feelings. When you bury your emotions, they will resurface at some point. Do not save up all your hurts to use them in an all-out war. Learn to deal with situations as they arise.

Attack the Problem, Not Each Other

The story is told of a shepherd who observed that when a band of wild horses were attacked by wolves, they formed a circle with their heads to the center and kicked out at the wolves, driving them off. When a band of wild donkeys were attacked, they too formed a circle, but with their heads toward the wolves. When they began to kick, they ended up kicking each other. These illustrations show the benefits of banding together and attacking a problem, not attacking one other.

Communicate Your Feelings Appropriately

Do not assume the other person knows what you are thinking or feeling. You can do this by making "I" statements rather than "you" statements. For instance, if you say, "You make me so mad when you do that,"

two things happen. First, you accuse the other person of making you feel a certain way. And this is unfair because no one can force you to feel any particular way. Second, you eliminate any chance of the other person hearing your real feelings because you have put him or her on the defensive. A better way to express your feelings is to say, "I get angry when you do that." In this way, you own your feelings and help the other person to be a better listener.

Focus on the Future

The elder brother in the story of the Prodigal did not focus on the positive. He chose to remember his brother's sins rather than rejoice in his repentance. Psychologically, it is easier to begin new behaviors than to terminate old ones. But rather than describing the faults you have seen in the past, concentrate on defining for the other person the improvements you would like to see in the future.

Avoid Saying "You never" or "You always"

Phrases like "you never" or "you always" do not help the conflict resolution process. In fact, they leave you open for contradiction. A better policy is to let the facts speak for themselves. Paul said we are to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Also, try not to raise your voice.

Define the Areas of Agreement and Disagreement

Set some parameters, some boundaries for your discussion. Do not tackle all the problem areas at once. Begin by finding issues or points with which you agree. Then, define in rational terms your points of disagreement. Often you will find that you both want the same thing. You just have different means of achieving it.

Accept Responsibility for Your Contributions to the Problem

This was the step the elder brother found difficult. His pride got in the way. Few conflicts are one-sided; most involve contributions from both sides. When you

are willing to accept responsibility for the problem, the other person will be more likely to meet you halfway. Furthermore, if you are willing to admit blame, the situation is almost immediately defused.

Explain What Change You Are Willing to Make

It takes courage to take this step. There is risk involved as the other person may not respond in kind. But the only way some situations are going to change is if you are willing to change. So admit your error, and state what you will do to change.

Forgive

The father of the prodigal was quick to forgive his errant son, something the elder brother could not bring himself to do. Instead, the older brother felt it was his duty to punish the prodigal. Yet, God said in Deuteronomy 32:35, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay." Since punishment is in the hands of God, we are left with only one option regarding those with whom we are in conflict. We must forgive them! What makes forgiving difficult is that often our offenders have done nothing to deserve our forgiveness. But when we unconditionally forgive those who have wronged us, it means: 1) we are not demanding a change on their part or "cutting a deal with them," 2) we are not just being tolerant or lenient with them, 3) we are not pretending that what they did to us did not matter and that we are just trying to forget about it. We forgive simply because it is what God would have us do, and because we sincerely want to end the conflict.

This lesson has given you plenty to think about. You may be in the midst of a conflict today. Why not apply the biblical principles from this lesson? God will honor your willingness to practice His principles. Regardless of your role in ministry, the more skills you learn in dealing with conflict, the happier you and others you deal with will be. It takes practice and determination to become proficient in handling conflict, but you can do it!

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. *Conflict usually emerges as a*
 - a) *lack of spiritual maturity.*
 - b) *symptom of other unmet needs.*
 - c) *sign that two persons are incompatible.*
2. *What does the Bible say regarding quarreling?*
 - a) *The Bible strictly forbids quarreling.*
 - b) *It has nothing to say about quarreling.*
 - c) *It encourages people to freely express their feelings.*
3. *What is a basic difference between good conflict and bad conflict?*
 - a) *Good conflict focuses on the other person; bad conflict focuses on the problem.*
 - b) *Good conflict can help clarify issues.*
 - c) *This is no such thing as good conflict.*
4. *Which is not a characteristic of constructive conflict?*
 - a) *Constructive conflict reveals the weaknesses in people's lives.*
 - b) *Constructive conflict can promote better communication.*
 - c) *Constructive conflict can be God's way of teaching us humility, forgiveness, and reconciliation.*
5. *What were some situations the early church faced that can also produce conflicts today?*
 - a) *Rapid changes and many differences among believers in the church*
 - b) *The early church was not growing; it was stagnant.*
 - c) *The early church did not experience conflict.*
6. *Which is true regarding the effect of change on conflict?*
 - a) *Both positive and negative changes can cause conflict.*
 - b) *Only negative changes cause conflict.*
 - c) *Only positive changes cause good conflicts; only negative changes cause bad conflicts.*

7. *In the story of the Prodigal, which attitude of the elder brother contributed to the conflict?*
 - a) *He was jealous of the good time his younger brother had.*
 - b) *He was glad that his younger brother had returned home.*
 - c) *The older brother was judgmental of his brother's actions.*

8. *James suggests the solution to interpersonal conflict is*
 - a) *prayer.*
 - b) *humility.*
 - c) *repentance.*

9. *What could you do to better inform another person of your feelings?*
 - a) *Learn to make "you" statements rather than "I" statements.*
 - b) *Learn to make "I" statements rather than "you" statements.*
 - c) *Ignore the person.*

10. *What is likely to happen if you accept responsibility for your part in a problem?*
 - a) *The other person may agree that it is your fault entirely.*
 - b) *The other person may consider the matter closed.*
 - c) *The other person may be willing to meet you half way.*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: If you answered a study question incorrectly, you can find the objective it was drawn from by looking at the reference in parenthesis.

1. *b (11.1)*
2. *a (11.1)*
3. *b (11.1)*
4. *a (11.1)*
5. *a (11.2)*
6. *a (11.2)*
7. *c (11.3)*
8. *b (11.3)*
9. *b (11.4)*
10. *c (11.4)*

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