

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

SOLVING CONFLICTS

Ephesians 4:17-24

By

Steven J. Cole

February 19, 1995

Copyright, 1995

February 19, 1995
Christian Family Living (7)

Solving Conflicts Ephesians 4:17-32

It happens again and again, all across America. A couple meets. Something "clicks." A romance begins. They fall in love. As they stand at the front of the church pledging their lives to one another, family and friends look on with beaming smiles. Everyone agrees that they are such a perfect couple.

But at some point after this idyllic scene, problems hit. The couple begins to discover that they are not as compatible as they had thought. The romance fades. Conflicts grow more intense and frequent. They finally conclude that they are no longer in love and go their separate ways, hoping to find someone the next time around who will be more compatible. I read recently of an actress who ended her 40-day marriage, claiming irreconcilable differences!

But the problem is rarely a lack of compatibility--no two people are compatible. The problem is not knowing how to solve conflicts God's way, or not being willing to go God's way. Any two people who live together in the closeness of marriage are going to have conflicts--even "spiritual Christians!" A good marriage isn't one where two compatible people never have conflicts; a good marriage is one where two self-willed people have learned to submit to Christ and to work out their differences in Christian love. You will have a satisfying marriage to the degree that you learn to solve your conflicts God's way. You don't need to find a more compatible mate as much as you need to learn how to become a more compatible mate.

In Ephesians 4:17-32, Paul gives some principles for solving conflicts. He says that ...

We can solve conflicts if we put off the behavior of the old man and put on the behavior of the new man.

1. The source of conflicts--the old man (4:17-24).

The main source of conflicts is our old man (old nature). Some Bible teachers insist that believers do not have an old nature,

but just a new nature, and that our propensity toward sin comes from the flesh (John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Ephesians* [Moody Press], p. 164). I fail to see any biblical distinction between the old nature and the flesh. Whatever you call it, there is, even in the believer, a strong, indwelling disposition to do what *we* want rather than what *God* wants: "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way ..." (Isa. 53:6). "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?" (James 4:1). That old sin nature (old man, flesh--I'm using these terms interchangeably) pits us against one another and results in conflicts.

A number of other factors also, when coupled with our sin nature, lead to conflicts: We come from different backgrounds and experiences (type of family, where we're from, income levels, etc.); we have different habit patterns; different convictions and values; different perspectives and ways of thinking as men and women; different goals; etc. But with all these factors, the underlying reason for conflicts is our "old man" which is self-seeking, living to gratify its own desires.

But when you came to faith in Jesus Christ, a radical change took place: You became a new person in Christ. Your bent toward sin was not eradicated, but God made you a new person, created in righteousness and holiness of the truth (4:24). The power of the old man has been broken. When you were saved, you took it off like dirty clothes (4:22) and put on the new man like a suit of clean clothes (4:24). And you are involved in the ongoing process of renewing your mind (4:23). That process continues as you count as true in your experience and behavior the reality of the change spiritually that took place at salvation. You must believe what God says--that you are a new person in Christ; and you must act upon that truth in your behavior.

As you learn to believe what God says about you in Christ and to act upon it daily, you will learn to get along with other people, whether your mate or others, because you are daily dying to the old self. So you can solve conflicts by putting on the behavior of the new man, which Paul specifies in verses 25-32:

2. The solution to conflicts--the new man (4:25-32).

Paul spells out five behavioral changes of the new man:

A. The new man replaces falsehood with truth (4:25).

Paul is applying this principle to relationships in the church ("members of one another"). But how much more does it apply to married partners, who are one flesh with each other! There must be complete truthfulness if communication is to take place so that conflicts can be resolved.

At first blush, you may think, "That's not my problem. I don't lie; I'm honest." But because we fear confrontation, or because "we don't want to cause trouble," or because we're afraid that if our real feelings were revealed, the relationship might suffer, we often fail to speak the truth. I have counseled with wives who were ready to divorce their husbands. When I've asked if they've ever talked honestly with him about the problems, they say, "Oh, no, I couldn't do that! He'd explode!" So they'd rather divorce him than speak truthfully to him about their problems!

Paul uses the analogy of the body here. If you get leprosy, your hand when it's in pain does not communicate truthfully with your brain. You can actually burn your fingers off without knowing it. For healing and correction to take place, there must be truthful communication. You can't deal with a problem you're not aware of. To plaster over our feelings or thoughts and put on a happy face when there is a problem does not foster healthy relationships. In reality, that kind of behavior is more destructive than "speaking the truth in love."

I'm not suggesting that a couple be ruthlessly honest in sharing everything. Some things don't need to be shared. I can't give a formula on what not to share (that's another message in itself!). But I will say this: The motive in speaking the truth must not be selfish—to gain the upper hand, to further one's own happiness, or "just to get it off my chest." The motive must be to grow in godliness and help the other person grow by coming more fully under the lordship of Christ. In other words, the motive is biblical love, to seek the highest good of your mate because you care deeply for him or her. With that motive, a couple must learn to lay aside falsehood and speak truth so that conflicts can be resolved.

B. The new man replaces indifference with proper anger (4:26-27).

You would not think that a section dealing with proper relationships would include verse 26. "Are you sure the text is not missing the word 'not'?" you might ask. But proper anger has a place in dealing with conflict. This verse has elicited a number of explanations. I think that Paul is implying that there is something worse than anger in relationships, namely, indifference. If you care deeply for someone, and he is repeatedly sinning, his sin should make you angry. Indifference shows that you aren't loving. So Paul cites Psalm 4:4 (LXX) to say, "Allow the sin of the person to stir you up enough to deal with it."

"But," he quickly adds, "be careful! When you get angry about someone's sin, it's easy to cross the line into sinful, selfish anger. Don't do that. In your anger, do not sin. And, don't let it fester for days on end. Deal with it and put it aside, so that you don't grow bitter. Don't let the sun go down on your anger or you will give the devil an opportunity to lead you astray, too." That is the proper sense of verses 26 & 27 as I understand it.

In other words, anger that flares up because I did not get my way or because someone has offended me, is sinful. Anger that blows up is never proper because it is not under control. We are to be slow to anger (James 1:19) because God is slow to anger (Exod. 34:6). Anger that clams up and does not confront a problem, but just goes into a slow burn, often with hateful or vengeful thoughts, is sinful because it's acting on the basis of self, not for the purpose of seeking truth and reconciliation. Proper anger is motivated by the knowledge that sin destroys people. Its motive is restoration of the sinner and reconciliation of the relationship out of the desire for God to be glorified. Thus it attacks the problem, not the person.

Thus we have to be careful with anger in relationships. It's easy to cross the line from righteous anger to selfish anger and thus to sin. It's easy to justify selfish anger as righteous, when it's not. But it's also easy to back off from anger and become indifferent: "If he wants to destroy himself, that's his problem! I couldn't care less!" That's also sin, because it's motivated by selfishness. Self-sacrificing love becomes angry, angry enough to confront difficult

problems, angry enough to take the initiative for reconciliation; but it's careful not to sin.

C. The new man replaces selfishness with giving (4:28).

In 4:28, Paul is not talking primarily about marriage, of course. He's talking about the need for Christians to be honest, hard-working people who are oriented toward giving, not taking. But there is a principle here that applies to resolving conflicts in any relationship. The old man is motivated by selfishness, out to get what he can for himself, preferably without any effort. He looks out for his own needs and isn't concerned about others' needs, except to exploit them for his own benefit. But you can never resolve conflicts if both parties are trying to exploit or to enrich themselves at the other's expense.

The new man, however, is not lazy or self-centered. He works hard in order to give to the other person. He looks out for the needs of his mate and tries to meet those needs, even if it means hard work for himself. He is not in the relationship for what he can take, but for what he can give. Instead of complaining, "My mate isn't meeting my needs," he asks, "Am I meeting my mate's needs?"

A main reason that many couples can't resolve their differences is that they are thieves in their marriage. They rob their partners of love and respect. They don't give them their time or, worst of all, they don't give themselves. Replacing selfishness with giving is a key to resolving conflicts. With both partners looking out for the needs of the other, they can arrive at mutually agreeable solutions.

D. The new man replaces destructive speech with constructive speech (4:29).

We saw this principle last week in 1 Peter 3:8-12. Destructive speech that tears down the other person will not resolve conflicts. Proverbs 12:18 states, "There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." In other words, your tongue can be a sword to wound and kill, or it can be a scalpel to deal carefully with the problem and bring healing.

“Rotten speech” includes: Name-calling, sarcasm, ridicule, mockery, gossip, slander, blaming, destructive criticism, angry words of threat or revenge, griping, complaining, lying, profanity, and filthy talk or dirty jokes. Words whose purpose is to wound, not heal, must be put away.

We are not just to hold our tongue, however. We are to replace destructive words with constructive words that build up the other person at his point of need; and not because he deserves it, but because our God is gracious, and thus we are to be gracious in our speech. (Grace is undeserved favor.) There is a proper place for criticism or confrontation, but it should be with the goal of helping, not hurting. A good rule of thumb is, if it's painful for you to criticize, you're probably safe in doing it. But if you take the slightest pleasure in it, hold your tongue. The motive should be to help the other person on to maturity in Christ. Correction should always be done in gentleness (Gal. 6:1; 2 Tim. 2:24-26). Our goal should never be to win. We want God to win by being glorified as we both submit to Him.

E. The new man replaces improper anger with kindness and forgiveness (4:31-32).

There are six behaviors of the old man we must *put off*: Bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice. All these terms describe the same selfish, sinful behavior, but from slightly different angles. *Bitterness* results from anger or hurt feelings which are not dealt with. It results from blaming or keeping score. It is long-term hostility. *Wrath* means outbursts of anger (from a word meaning “to boil”). *Anger* refers to a settled disposition or attitude, often with the purpose of revenge. *Clamor* means fighting with loud words, yelling, screaming or crying. Sometimes angry people try to intimidate by yelling; at other times, they try to manipulate with emotional outbursts. In either case, it's selfish behavior aimed at getting one's own way.

Slander means speaking against someone to another, trying to damage the person's reputation so that you look good. *Malice* is a general term for any kind of ill-will toward a person. It means “having it in” for someone, where you want to see him brought down. It is the opposite of self-sacrificing love, which seeks to build up the other person.

All these actions of the old man hinder resolving conflicts. They are motivated by self and thus opposed to love. Thus they must be put off like dirty clothes. In their place, we can resolve conflicts if we *put on* the behaviors of the new man that we have become in Christ:

Kindness was used of mellow wine that is not harsh, that doesn't bite. The word has the nuance of being useful. A kind person thinks of the other person's needs and takes action to meet those needs. A kind husband allows his wife and children room to make mistakes without crawling all over them. He gives them time to grow and change. To be *tender-hearted* (we saw this word in 1 Pet. 3:8) means to feel deeply for one another. Love cares and shows it.

Forgiving one another. The Greek word points to undeserved favor. How God in Christ forgave you is the standard. He didn't forgive you because you deserved it. As Jesus taught in His parable in Matthew 18:21-35, God has forgiven us an enormous debt, so that anything we forgive one another is small by way of comparison. Forgiveness is costly and difficult; but not forgiving is not an option for Christians (Matt. 6:14-15). Family members need to keep short accounts with one another. If you're wrong, ask for forgiveness; if you were wronged, forgive in your heart even before the other person repents, and grant it the instant they ask you to forgive them.

Ogden Nash has a wise bit of verse: "To keep your marriage brimming with love in the loving cup, when you're wrong admit it, when you're right, shut up."

To resolve conflicts, put off the selfish behaviors of the old man and put on the loving behaviors of the new man. This opens the door for helpful communication and problem solving. But I skipped a verse. It is undoubtedly the key to solving conflicts in the family or with other Christians:

3. The key-solution to conflicts--the Holy Spirit (4:30).

It's significant that right in the middle of a passage dealing with relationships, Paul mentions grieving the Holy Spirit! Specifically, rotten speech (4:29) grieves the Holy Spirit. This implies several things. First, our motive in having harmonious relationships is not so that we can live happily. Our motive should be not to grieve

God or, to put it positively, to please God. The Holy Spirit is a person who can be grieved, not an impersonal force. At salvation, He sealed us for the day of redemption. The Spirit Himself is the seal, God's personal mark of ownership on us. If we don't have the Spirit indwelling us, we do not belong to Christ (Rom. 8:9). The reason we must seek to put off the behaviors of the old man and put on the behaviors of the new in our relationships is that we want to please the indwelling Spirit.

Also, we can't separate our relationship with God and our relationships with one another. John says that if we say we love God, but we do not love our brother, we're deceived (1 John 4:20). If a man claims to be a Christian, but he's living for self, shredding relationships with his family and in the church, he'd better examine his relationship with God. At best, he's grieving the Holy Spirit; at worst, he may not be saved.

To be solving conflicts in your marriage, you need to be cultivating your relationship with God through His Word. As you examine your life by the Word, you'll learn what pleases the Lord and you'll grow more sensitive to what grieves Him. Things like dishonesty, indifference, selfishness, abusive speech, and anger will prick your conscience as you realize how they grieve the Lord. So you'll replace them with truthfulness, caring confrontation, giving, words that build up, and kindness.

Conclusion

If there's frequent conflict in your home, I'd ask you to examine yourself. Are you putting off the selfish behavior of the old man and putting on the loving behavior of the new man out of a desire to please the Lord who gave Himself so that you could be forgiven? The bad news is: Yes, you, your spouse and children are incompatible! The good news is: In Christ, there can be true harmony and the resolving of conflicts if we learn to put off the old way of life and put on the new life He has graciously provided for us.

Discussion Questions

1. How can we know how honest to be? Should we share every secret thought?
2. How can we determine whether our anger is sinful or righteous?
3. How can we know when to confront and when to let something go?
4. How can a Christian who has been deeply hurt truly forgive?

Copyright 1995, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.