

Conflict: Be a Peacemaker in a Warring World – Matthew 18:21-35

When Bethany and I first moved to California in 2005 we joined a Bible Study as a part of college ministry at our church as I began school and she began working at a hospital. We were excited to get involved and were still trying to figure out our lives with work, school, and new ministry. After just a couple of months in this study the leader, who was an older seminary student, approached me and basically told me we weren't committed enough and we should find another ministry to be a part of. It was devastating to us and felt a little harsh, but we eventually ended up serving with high school students and we loved our time there. This older seminary student went on to graduate and become a missionary in Spain. We didn't interact that much throughout school. It felt a bit awkward.

After Bethany and I moved to Virginia in 2010 I was back in California for a pastors' conference and this guy was there. I saw him and he quickly approached me and asked to talk. I still felt pretty weird about what had happened because we had never really had a follow up conversation and it had been at least 5 years. He started the conversation by saying, "I need to ask for your forgiveness". Which shocked me. He explained that God had been working on him and his grasp of grace, and he realized how badly he had treated us. He didn't caveat it and he was humble, straight forward, and honest. I immediately forgave him and to this day if I see him at a conference, we gladly catch up and it's always great to see him. Forgiveness led to genuine reconciliation, which is the goal of this whole series on conflict.

But there's a pathway to reconciliation that we must learn and follow and that path is what we started looking at two weeks ago and will finish today. Let me remind you of this: **4 Keys to Actively Pursue Reconciliation.**

1. Commence the Process

The basic idea here is that you be the one to initiate. You own your 10% of the issue. Listen to Matthew 5:23-24.

2. Confess Your Role

You start the process by going to the person and clearly confessing your role in the conflict, sin or offense. I gave you the 7 A's of a biblical confession two weeks ago, but the heart of confession is to honestly own your sin and to clearly state it to the wronged party. This has to take place for reconciliation to even be a possibility.

Now let's move to our last two keys.

3. Communicate the Truth

You own your wrong and clearly confess it and ask for forgiveness, and then there comes a point in time when you must communicate the truth of the other person's role to him or her.

For the longest time Bethany and I have used the book *The Meaning of Marriage* by Tim and Kathy Keller for pre-marital counseling. There's a principle they talk about in that book concerning marriage that applies to all relationships and especially when you are dealing with conflict. It's the principle of love and truth. Every relationship must communicate in love and truth. If you only ever affirm the positive and state your love, but never speak truths that are harder to hear, eventually the affirmation will lose its value because it can't be trusted. But if you never speak love and only ever correct, the correction loses its value because that person doesn't know you love them.

If a relationship has hit a wall and there's been a breach in it, it cannot move forward in love without the communication of the truth. And in reality, communicating the truth is itself an act of love, especially when a person you care about is caught in a pattern of sin.

We've talked about this principle before, but it's all over Scripture, especially the NT. Confronting sin is an act of love. Listen to Galatians 6:1-2. Notice that when we bear one another's burdens, we are fulfilling the law of Christ. What is the law of Christ? Listen to 1 John 4:21. This is exactly what Jesus called the disciples to on the night of his betrayal. John 13:34-35. But this love is not simply constant affirmation and affection. It's love that actually desires what is good for that person and that may mean helping him or her with a burden.

This word “burden” in Galatians 6:2 can be broad and include any sort of difficulty a fellow believer is carrying, but in the context, it clearly means a transgression that this brother is caught in. *“Reproof is unavoidable. God's Word demands it when a brother falls into open sin. The practice of discipline in the congregation begins in the smallest circles. Where defection from God's Word in doctrine or life imperils the family fellowship and with it the whole congregation, the word of admonition and rebuke must be ventured. Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin.”* – Dietrich Bonhoeffer

So, you must go and communicate the truth, and we talked a few weeks ago about how to confront. But I'll just add, these conversations ought to be done in a manner that is shaped and formed by the gospel, and they need to be done out of motivation drawn from the gospel. Listen to Romans 15:1-3. In other words, focus on what God has done for you and for them and let Christ's sacrifice to reconcile you energize you to be willing to go and have a difficult conversation.

4. Clear the Wrong

Reconciliation cannot happen without forgiveness, and it's clear that forgiveness is required of Christians. Listen to Colossians 3:12-13. Matthew 6:12, 14-15. You can see from both passages that our forgiveness of others is directly modeled on God's forgiveness of us. So, there should be quite a bit of similarity in how we forgive others and how God has forgiven us. So, what is forgiveness? I'm going to give you a good definition and then highlight some key parts of it.

“A commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability and to be reconciled to that person, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated.” - Chris Brauns

Notice first that forgiveness is a commitment. It's not a feeling and it's not something that primarily happens internally. It's not a state of mind. Also notice that forgiveness can only be extended to one who is repentant. This is a big deal and is exactly modeled off of God's forgiveness of us. Does God forgive people

who do not repent of their sins? Does God just have a feeling of forgiveness toward those who have rebelled against him and that qualifies as forgiveness? Not at all. Forgiveness is a transaction. The repentant person asks for forgiveness and it is granted by the offended party. Let me show you this in a couple of passages of Scripture. Listen to Luke 17:1-4. It couldn't be clearer there. And then remember the story that was read earlier from Matthew 18:21-35. Right on the heels of this process of confronting sin in Matthew 18:15-20. Notice within this story that forgiveness is given when asked for. Look at verse 26. Look at verse 32 and see how the servant's forgiveness is directly tied to his repentance.

So, let me try to bring this into life today. You will often see some tragic event take place on the national stage and a clear wrong was done. I think of the horrific church shooting in Charleston South Carolina in 2015. A young white supremacist went into an African American church and killed 9 people. Other members of the church came out a few days later and publicly proclaimed their forgiveness of Dylan Roof, the shooter. The problem is that he was not repentant and had not sought their forgiveness. They could not actually release him from "moral liability and be reconciled" to him with true biblical forgiveness.

It's vital that you understand forgiveness as a commitment that comes in response to repentance for a couple of reasons. First, relationships cannot be brought to wholeness in every day life without ongoing recognition of sin and repentance and with forgiveness then given. If you are expected to simply forgive your spouse internally for that harsh word he keeps saying, it never actually deals with the issue. The relationship never moves forward because it's not based on truth.

Second, the pathway to bitterness is actually in attempting to internally gloss over a wrong done and "forgive" without repentance, confrontation, and actually dealing with the wrong done.

So, I know what you all are thinking. What do I do if I've been wronged and the other person will not repent? Do I just stay perpetually angry? No and there's clear biblical direction here. Turn to Romans 12:14-21. Don't pursue revenge, actively show love to that person, and allow God's wrath to ultimately bring about justice. Nowhere in this text are we expected to forgive and just emotionally

pardon this person, but neither do we hold a grudge and seek to destroy that person in revenge. We pray for their repentance, and we are ready and willing to forgive, but we also do good and trust God's ultimate justice.

But when forgiveness is sought because of repentance, notice in our definition that pardon is graciously given. This can be challenging, even when forgiveness is asked for and repentance is genuine. The hurt can be deep and the consequences enduring. There's an element of us that wants the other person to earn forgiveness. Show me you mean it. Do something to make it right. There's a cry for justice deep in our hearts that says, it's not fair if I just release this person from the wrong done.

And yet, as we've seen all morning, our forgiveness of others is modeled on God's forgiveness of us, and it's motivated by God's gracious forgiveness of us. This is the heart of the gospel, and this is what really will change your heart. This is the New Covenant promise of a changed heart. Listen to Jeremiah 31:33-34. What brings about the change? How can sinful people know God? "*For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.*"

Just stop for a moment and consider the mountain of sin you have amassed against God in your life. Self-centered, egotistical, driven by worldly desires, ignoring God and failing to seek Him. We all come into this world broken by sin, and we live out that brokenness in thousands of different ways. Every day our debt increases and our rebellion intensifies. And yet, for those of you who are believers, God graciously revealed your sin to you and brought you to repentance. You asked for forgiveness and God has promised to grant it to you. He has released you from all moral liability and He says He will remember your sin no more. Free. Debt gone. Sin erased. Separated from you. Instead, the righteousness of Christ.

In the book I mentioned earlier, *The Meaning of Marriage*, the Keller's say that in marriage the only thing that can bring together the power of love and the power of truth in a relationship is grace. But you can't manufacture grace in your own heart.

"How do you get the power of grace? You can't create this power; you can only reflect it to others if you have received it. If you see Jesus dying on the cross for others, forgiving the people who killed him, that can be just a crushing example of forgiving love that you will never be able to live up to. But if instead you see Jesus dying on the cross for you, forgiving you, putting away your sin, that changes everything." – Tim & Kathy Keller

So, be bold in truth and love, and let the power of grace flood your heart in each and every relationship you have. Let's pray.