



# CONFLICT RESOLUTION: TURNING FIGHTS INTO FRUITFUL CONVERSATIONS



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## Introduction

I hate conflict. By nature, I'm an agreeable guy who values camaraderie over combat. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy to have differing opinions and spar when necessary. After all, as a pastor, the world tends to disagree with me on plenty.

However, despite those disagreements, I still like to get along with those around me. But every now and then, I bump into someone with whom conflict seems inevitable. It's in that moment when a simple difference of opinion escalates into something noticeably heavier—a strained conversation, a lingering tension, or even a fractured relationship. As a pastor, I've seen this in my own life and in the lives of others. Conflict, it seems, is an unwelcome guest that shows up uninvited, yet it's one we must learn to address with grace and wisdom.

## Part I: What is Conflict?

Conflict can be defined as “a serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one.” Others may prefer the simpler definition, simply calling conflict “a fight.” Both definitions capture the essence of conflict, but they don’t fully convey the emotional weight it carries.

However you define conflict, you know it when you’re in it. It’s that knot in your stomach when you know a tough conversation is looming. It’s the sleepless night spent replaying a heated exchange. It’s the awkward silence in a room where two people are at odds. For believers, conflict often feels like a betrayal of the unity we’re called to embody as the body of Christ.

Conflict can easily dominate your thoughts, making it difficult to even engage in regular conversations, especially with the one you’re in conflict with. It’s as if the air between you has thickened, making every word feel like a potential landmine. For some, conflict sparks anger or defensiveness; for others, it breeds anxiety or withdrawal. No matter how it manifests, it disrupts the harmony we long for in our relationships. If you’re like me, conflict can be extremely discouraging.

### *What About You?*

How do you react to conflict? Do you find yourself avoiding it at all costs, hoping it will resolve itself? Or do you lean into it, perhaps too eagerly, always at the ready to defend your position? Maybe you’re somewhere in between, wrestling with how to navigate it faithfully. Wherever you fall, you’re not alone. Conflict is a universal experience that affects every relationship, whether with a spouse, coworker, friend, or fellow believer.

I’ve talked to enough people to know that I’m not unique in preferring peace. Yet, conflict remains, and it doesn’t seem to be going away anytime soon. In fact, in Matthew 24, Jesus makes it clear to his disciples that conflict will remain until he returns (Matt. 24:6). Jesus spoke of wars and rumors of wars, of division and strife, as hallmarks of a fallen world awaiting redemption. This isn’t just about global conflicts; it’s true in our personal lives, too. From heated family disputes to church disagreements, conflict is woven into the fabric of our existence this side of glory.

There’s a reason you picked up this guide. Perhaps it was a past conflict long ago, or a conflict you’re in the middle of now. Maybe you see conflict on the horizon, and you’re looking for wisdom beforehand.

Maybe you’re reading this because your personality is prone to conflict. It could be that you enjoy conflict a bit too much. You thrive in debates and relish the chance to prove a point. But over the years, you’ve noticed that these small victories come at a cost: strained friendships, tense family dynamics, co-workers who fear you more than respect you, or even a reputation amongst others for being contentious.

Whatever your situation, reading this implies that you’re trying to handle conflict in a way that honors God and restores relationships. That’s a good thing.

The good news is that one day, all conflict will be eradicated. Christ will return, establish his kingdom, and strife will be a distant memory. Imagine a world where every conversation is marked by love, where disagreements no longer divide, and where peace reigns in every heart. This is the hope we cling to as believers—a future where conflict is replaced by the perfect harmony of God’s kingdom (Rev. 21:4). So, if you feel discouraged by conflict but are trusting in Christ, know that it’s only a temporary reality!

Until that day, though, we live in the tension of a broken world, and we need God’s wisdom to navigate it. To find wisdom, we turn to God’s word. Through the pages of Scripture, we find the principles and practices that equip us to turn fights into fruitful conversations that reflect the heart of our Savior.

## First Principles

### *Principle #1: Strive for Peace*

The book of Romans is full of rich theology. I find myself going to it again and again to better understand salvation, faith, justification, sin, and God’s sovereignty. But conflict isn’t a topic I think of when I think of Romans. However, there’s a precious nugget that informs our approach to all conflict.

About midway through his letter to the church in Rome, while discussing the marks of a true Christian, Paul exhorts his readers, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18). This verse reminds us that peace is not just a passive state but an active pursuit, one that requires effort, humility, and intentionality. Just a couple of chapters later, Paul would say something similar in Romans 14:19, “So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” Paul’s words are a challenge to live in a way that reflects the gospel, even when conflict threatens to pull us apart.

This is particularly profound when you consider the context of his letter.

When they first read Paul’s words, Christians in Rome were likely experiencing relative peace. They weren’t undergoing persecution. Conflict was minimal. Living “peaceably with all” was seemingly attainable.

But in just a few years, the Christians in Rome would experience widespread persecution under Emperor Nero. Believers would be subjected to brutal treatment and public execution. Talk about conflict! Yet, in the back of many of their minds would have been Paul’s inspired words, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18).

Imagine the weight of those words as believers faced hostility, betrayal, and even death. They were called to respond not with vengeance or bitterness but with a commitment to peace, as far as it depended on them. This wasn’t a call to compromise their faith but to embody the gospel’s reconciling power in the face of unimaginable conflict.

I know that’s an extreme case, but friend, that call remains binding on us today. As followers of Christ, we don’t seek to navigate conflict faithfully so we can acquire a tactical advantage over our opponents.

We do this so that we can fulfill Christ's command to live peaceably with everyone. Doing so affords us more opportunities to clearly display the gospel of peace to those around us.

Living peaceably with others is all the more important when the conflict is between brothers and sisters in Christ. Consider this: Of all the things that others could identify us by, the Lord tells us that our love for one another serves as the primary evidence that we're his disciples (John 13:35).

Not our words.

Not our love for neighbor.

Not our giving.

Not our church attendance.

Not our evangelism.

Not our preaching.

Not how many people we disciple each week.

Each of those is important, no doubt. These acts of obedience flow from our faith and are vital to our witness. But, remarkably, the primary way others recognize God's people is by our love for *one another*. Don't miss that!

As redeemed individuals still wrestling against our flesh, we're bound to have conflict. And when it shows up, we shouldn't be shocked. But handling it poorly serves as an indictment against our profession of faith. A church marked by unresolved conflict or bitterness undermines its witness. Conversely, a church that resolves conflict biblically—through love, forgiveness, and reconciliation—becomes a beacon of hope, pointing others to the transforming power of Christ. Let's strive to be that kind of people, working hard for peace and reflecting God's love even in our disagreements.

### *Principle #2: Don't Idolize Peace*

Although Romans 12:18 calls us to pursue peace, we can't overlook the beginning of Paul's exhortation. He says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." His qualifier—"if possible"—acknowledges the reality of a fallen world. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, peace eludes us. Perhaps the other party refuses to reconcile, or the conflict stems from a non-negotiable truth of the gospel. In these moments, we must hold fast to our calling without compromising our convictions.

It may be tempting, but peace should not take priority over faithfulness. We pursue peace with one another, but not at the expense of peace with God. This is a critical distinction. Pursuing peace at all costs can lead to compromise—whether it's softening the truth to avoid offense or ignoring sin to keep the peace. Such actions may bring temporary harmony, but ultimately dishonor God and harm relationships. True peace is found in Christ, not the world.

This is what Jesus was warning his disciples of in Luke 12:51 when he said, "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." Yes, Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6). Yes, Jesus will establish peace when his kingdom is consummated on earth (Isa. 11:6-9; Rom. 14:17;

Col. 1:19-20; Rev. 11:15). But only those who willingly bow their knees to Christ acquire the peace he offers.

Jesus warns us that pledging our allegiance to him may cause division with those who reject him. This division isn't something we seek, but it's a reality we must accept. When conflict arises, turning our back on Christ to acquire peace isn't an option. To do so would be idolatry, placing our relationship with others ahead of our relationship with Christ.

Idolizing peace can manifest in subtle ways:

- Avoiding tough conversations to keep things comfortable
- Agreeing with error to avoid tension
- Prioritizing human approval over God's

As believers, we must guard against the temptation to idolize peace, anchoring ourselves in the truth that true peace comes from obedience to God, not from appeasing others.

With these things in place, let's now consider the roots of conflict, and once we understand that, we can explore how to turn conflict into fruitful conversation.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. When facing conflict, are you more likely to lean in, run away, or calmly respond? What does this say about your personality and, more importantly, about your spiritual maturity?
2. What are the benefits of having relationships marked by peace?
3. What steps can you take to bring peace to the relationships in your life that seem to be marked by conflict?
4. Have you ever been tempted to idolize peace? How have you seen that lead to compromise?

## Part II: Understanding the How and Why of Conflict

### The Roots (How)

From 2004 to 2012, the show *House* dominated television screens across the globe. It was a fictional drama telling the story of a brilliant, albeit prickly, Dr. Greg House and his diagnostic team at Princeton Plainsboro Teaching Hospital. It was a huge success, accumulating more than 50 awards over eight seasons! Aside from the characters, the thing that made the show so fascinating was that Dr. House and his team would receive some of the most perplexing medical cases one could imagine. Each episode was a puzzle to be solved. Their patients' outward symptoms were a result of what was going on inside their bodies. House's team had the difficult job of getting to the root causes of symptoms so that they could properly diagnose the patient.

Wrong Diagnosis = Wrong Treatment

Wrong Treatment = Ineffective Treatment and/or Death

We've already considered the inevitability of conflict in a fallen world. But what leads to that conflict? Just as a wrong medical diagnosis can lead to ineffective treatment, misjudging the cause of conflict can escalate tensions or prolong division. We need a clear, biblical framework to understand why conflict arises and how to address it effectively.

#### *The Diagnosis*

James provides the definitive diagnosis in his epistle when he writes, "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is the source not your pleasures that wage war in your body's parts?" (Jas. 4:1, NASB). I've chosen the NASB here for its literal rendering of "pleasures" (Greek: *hēdonē*), which highlights the selfish desires that fuel conflict. These inward desires—our cravings for control, recognition, or comfort—often lie at the heart of our disputes.

Think about it.

The last time you had a serious disagreement with someone, did you want what they were advocating for? Did you want what they were saying to be true? Your desires and their desires were fundamentally at odds, and James tells us that when this happens, "quarrels and conflicts" are born.

Consider a recent argument you've had. Perhaps it was with a spouse over how to spend money—one of you wanted to save, while the other wanted to splurge. Or maybe it was a disagreement with a friend about a decision that affected you both. In each case, the clash wasn't just about the issue at hand but about the underlying desires driving your positions.

Consider the rationale often given by couples going through a divorce: "We realized that we want different things." Biblically, they're saying what James said. Their conflict is rooted in the fact that their desires are misaligned. Without a shared commitment to God's design for marriage (Eph. 5:22-33), their

conflicting desires led to separation. But when couples align their desires with God's—seeking to reflect Christ's love and sacrifice—conflict can become a catalyst for growth rather than destruction.

The root cause, or diagnosis, of our conflict is found in our desires. From here, we see at least two symptoms.

### *Two Symptoms*

First, conflict arises when one or both parties have desires that don't match God's desires. So, before conflict manifests amongst themselves, at least one of them is having conflict with God. After all, if both were pursuing God's desires, then there wouldn't be conflict. This is a sobering truth. Our conflict with others often reveals a deeper conflict within—a heart that's out of sync with God's will.

For example, when I've snapped at a family member over a minor issue, I've had to step back and realize that my frustration stemmed from my desire for control or comfort, not from a heart submitted to God. When both parties pursue God's desires—his glory, his truth, his love—conflict loses its foothold.

Second, conflict arises when one or both parties consider themselves more important than the other. As Paul was exhorting the Philippians to be like Christ, he expounded on Christ's humility, urging them to "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3). This verse is a mirror to our souls. How often do we enter conflicts focused on defending our position rather than seeking the good of the other person?

Both problems go contrary to God's design.

### *God's Design*

When God redeems us, transferring us from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of his Son (Col. 1:13), we become a new creature (2 Cor. 5:17). Our old heart of stone is replaced with a heart of flesh (Ezek. 36:26). We begin to change little by little to look more like Jesus (2 Cor. 3:18). This transformation is nothing short of miraculous. The God who spoke the universe into existence reshapes our hearts, redirecting our desires and renewing our minds. As we grow in Christ, we begin to see the world through his eyes, valuing what he values and loving as he loves.

Jesus desired to do his Father's will (John 5:19, 30; 6:38; Matt. 26:39). Therefore, as we grow in Christlikeness, we begin to desire God's will more and more.

This process of growing to be more like Jesus is called sanctification. Jesus' life was marked by complete submission to the Father, even when it led to the cross. As we follow Him, our desires shift from self-centered pursuits to God-centered purposes. This shift doesn't happen overnight, but through the Spirit's work, we grow in our longing to please God above all else.

Part of God's will for us is to consider others as more significant than ourselves (Phil. 2:3). After all, the sinless Son of God humbled himself, became a human, took on the form of a servant, and died a sinner's

death so that we sinners could enjoy the riches of his righteous inheritance. As we begin to look more like Jesus, we too begin to consider others as more significant than ourselves, just like Jesus did. This is the antidote to conflict. When we prioritize others' needs above our own, we create space for reconciliation.

God's design for his redeemed people is that (1) our desires would be replaced with his desires, and (2) like his Son, we would consider others as more important than ourselves. If those two things are operating in both parties, conflict dissolves.

If you spend enough time in Christian circles, you'll find that we do some cheesy things. I can still picture coffee mugs from my childhood covered with well-known Bible verses printed in calligraphy. A classic, go-to verse for this sort of thing is Romans 8:28, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." What a great verse! In fact, for a long time, if you had asked me what my favorite Scripture verse was, I would have said Romans 8:28.

The truth anchored in that verse comforted me when my father was diagnosed with cancer, when my parents went through bankruptcy following the recession, when my father died of cancer, when my wife lost her brothers to muscular dystrophy, and when our church experienced a season of intense suffering. I can say with great confidence that the Lord has used each of those painful experiences to sanctify me, to reveal more of himself to me, to teach me what I otherwise wouldn't have learned, and to draw me closer to himself.

Each trial, though painful, was a tool in God's hand to shape me. When my father passed away, I learned to trust God's sovereignty in ways I hadn't before. When our church faced suffering, I saw the body of Christ rally together, displaying love and resilience that deepened our faith.

The same promise rings true for when we suffer conflict. Consider Paul's words in Romans 5:3-5: "...we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

Each of the benefits that Paul lists (endurance, character, hope) is an element of sanctification. Therefore, when we suffer conflict, we can be comforted knowing that God uses it to sanctify us. This perspective shifts how we view conflict. Instead of seeing it as a threat, we can see it as a divine opportunity. God is at work, even in the messiest disagreements, to refine us, strengthen our faith, and prepare us for eternity. Let's explore how this truth has played out in my own life and how it can encourage you in your conflicts.

## *College Days*

When I went into college, I had no desire to serve in pastoral ministry. That wasn't even on my radar. I was a Christian, but I desired to make a lot of money and be a faithful member of my church (perhaps in that order, if I'm honest).

In my mind, that was going to happen either by playing baseball or working hard in business. So, naturally, I went to a Christian college to play baseball and get a business degree.

But my sophomore year changed everything.

During my Sophomore year, I became completely burnt out on baseball. Furthermore, I had taken a "Christian Beliefs" class that rocked me. My professor spent most of our classes attempting to "debunk" key aspects of the Christian faith. Things like the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture, the creation account, the reality of hell and God's judgment against sin, the flood, and more. I knew I disagreed with him, and I'd often voice those disagreements, but I wasn't equipped to go toe-to-toe with him. His arguments were practiced, and as a young believer, I felt outmatched. I remember sitting in class, heart pounding, as I tried to articulate my objections, only to leave feeling frustrated and inadequate. Those moments of conflict were uncomfortable, but they were also pivotal.

This led me down a deep rabbit hole of Bible study. As I learned more about the reliability and trustworthiness of Scripture, I became more passionate about helping others see that as well. It grieved me that many of my classmates were being persuaded to untether themselves from God's word. I spent hours poring over books, listening to sermons, and discussing theology with friends. That season of conflict with my professor sparked a hunger for truth that I hadn't known before.

This newfound passion, partnered with the guidance of my pastors, led me to begin pursuing vocational ministry. Today, the Lord has granted me the immense privilege of serving full-time as a pastor at our church. I now get to spend the best hours of my day studying God's word and applying it to my own life and the lives of those in our congregation. A joy that far exceeds anything baseball, business, or money could offer.

Conflict with my professor was a catalyst that redirected my life's trajectory, leading me to a calling I never would have chosen on my own. God used a challenging professor to awaken a passion for his word and a desire to serve his people.

The Lord uses our conflict to bring about a greater good. This is the beauty of God's sovereignty. What we perceive as painful or disruptive, he uses to shape us into the image of his Son. Conflict, when viewed through the lens of Romans 8:28, becomes a tool in the hands of a loving God who is committed to our sanctification.

## *Ministry Days*

Lest you think conflict is a one-time occurrence in the life of a Christian, let me offer another, more recent example. This time, not from my undergrad days, but during my pastorate. This story is closer to my heart, as it involves the people I've been called to shepherd and the challenges of leading a young church through turbulent waters.

After undergrad, I went to seminary for a master's degree. Around graduation time, I began a pastoral apprenticeship at a small Baptist church. The apprenticeship was designed to last a year, and then I would be sent out to plant a church in the northeast region of Columbus, OH. It was an exciting and terrifying time.

Despite my own flaws, God was immensely kind to us. That wonderful church sent us out, and we saw quicker growth than expected. Additionally, we were able to appoint elders earlier than we had planned. All of which I was extremely excited about! Those early days were filled with joy. Families joined, lives were changed, and the gospel was advancing. Put simply, the first two years of our plant were incredible! Everything seemed to be going right.

And the next two years were miserable.

What happened?

Conflict.

Our elder team became increasingly divided on various issues. Things we thought we agreed on became disagreements. Some could be overlooked as petty preferences. Others were of great significance and would have entailed a significant theological shift for our church. This ongoing conflict lasted just under two years and was incredibly difficult. I may never forget the sleepless nights, the tense meetings, and the moments of doubt that crept in.

However, God used that season to sanctify me in ways I never would have imagined. He smoothed the sharp edges off my character that I didn't realize I had. He exposed idols. He increased my reliance on him. He convicted me of sin. He humbled me (privately and publicly). He granted me endurance. He sharpened my thinking. He equipped me in ways I didn't know I needed to be equipped. None of which would have happened apart from that prolonged season of conflict.

Furthermore, he used that season to sanctify our church! Our doctrinal unity, relational depth, and missional zeal all experienced noticeable strengthening that otherwise may never have happened. The conflict forced us to clarify our beliefs, deepen our relationships, and recommit to our mission. Families who could have left chose instead to stay and work through the tension, and their faithfulness continues to bear fruit. Today, our church is stronger, not despite the conflict, but because of it.

In short, God used conflict (that nobody wanted, no less) for my good and the good of our church. This is the promise of Romans 8:28 in action. God takes what we would avoid and uses it for our good and his glory. Conflict, though painful, is never wasted in God's economy.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. How do you typically respond when you're in conflict with someone?
2. Who in your life are you most likely to have conflict with?
3. How do your desires contribute to the conflict you experience with others?
4. Jesus served rather than demanded to be served. How would modeling this kind of Christ-like service help you resolve conflict?

## Part III: Practical Steps for Turning Fights into Fruitful Conversations

### Preparing Your Heart

Throughout my life, I've experienced on-and-off digestive issues, which have led to some intense bouts of vomiting. Not a particularly comforting reality, considering my father passed away from colon cancer. However, things weren't getting much better into adulthood, so in 2023 my doctor recommended that I get an endoscopy.

I obliged, primarily because I wanted to get this issue resolved once and for all. The prospect of an endoscopy wasn't exactly thrilling—few things sound less appealing than having a camera inserted down your throat. But I knew that ignoring the problem wouldn't make it go away. I had to face it head-on, trusting that the process, though uncomfortable, would help lead to answers and healing.

In order for the procedure to be a successful one, I needed to prepare for it. I was given strict instructions not to eat anything for a designated amount of time and to avoid certain liquids. This wasn't just about following rules; it was about ensuring the doctor could see clearly to accurately address any issues. I followed the directions, and by God's grace, the procedure went well and everything looked fine.

If we're committed to resolving conflict, then, like an uncomfortable procedure, we must intentionally prepare to have uncomfortable conversations. Appropriate preparation helps us see clearly to address the issues.

Below are three ways to intentionally prepare your heart:

#### *1. Prayer*

I know some people who thrive in uncomfortable conversations. They're particularly gifted at having them, and it seems as though they actually enjoy engaging in them. If you're like me, that's not your reality. Uncomfortable conversations make me feel more anxious than excited.

But I know I need to have them. Faithfulness to God requires it. As believers, we're called to address conflict, not avoid it. Ignoring issues may feel easier in the moment, but it often leads to deeper wounds and prolonged division. God calls us to pursue reconciliation, even when it's hard.

We're told in Philippians 4:6, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." This verse is a lifeline for those of us who dread difficult conversations. It reminds us that we don't face conflict alone—God is with us, ready to hear our prayers and provide his peace.

Our first step in preparing for difficult conversations is to bring the issue before the Lord in prayer. "Oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer" (*What a Friend We Have in Jesus*).

**Cast your anxieties on God.** Peter commands us to "[Cast] all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7). Carry those anxious thoughts to God in prayer, and be reminded of his promise, that "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:7).

**Confess your fears to God.** Tell God you feel anxious about the conversation. Acknowledge any fear of man that still resides in you. Acknowledge sin. This step is crucial. I've found that when I'm anxious about a conversation, it's often because I'm worried about how I'll be perceived. Will they think less of me? Will they get angry? By confessing these fears to God, I'm reminded that his approval is what matters most. He cares for me, and he's faithful to guide me. "The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe" (Prov. 29:25).

**Make requests of God.** Ask him to strengthen you, to reveal your sin, to bring the right words to mind during the conversation, to provide wisdom that comes from above, and to bring about resolution. Ask him to prepare your way and to bless your efforts. At times, I'll pray specific, brief prayers before a tough conversation: "Lord, help me speak the truth in love. Help me see my own blind spots. Soften their heart and mine. Let this conversation glorify you." These prayers anchor me in God's strength, not my own.

But before taking any other steps toward conflict resolution, you must first pray. Prayer isn't just a preliminary step; it's the foundation. It aligns our hearts with God's, calms our fears, and prepares us to approach others with grace and humility.

## 2. *Self-Reflect*

If you understand yourself to be a sinner (which you are!), humility necessitates taking time to consider how your sin has contributed to the conflict. This is one of the hardest but most transformative steps in conflict resolution. It's easy to point fingers, to see the other person's faults clearly. But humility requires us to turn the mirror on ourselves first, asking, "How have I contributed to this? Where have I sinned?"

I remember having a private meeting with some men about a significant issue that we were all working through. None of us were happy with how things had played out, and we were considering solutions, acknowledging how we had each contributed in some way to the problem at hand. It seemed that, although difficult, humility was enabling some progress to be made.

Until one of the men, who had been quiet, broke his silence. "I take zero responsibility for this," he said.

Confused stares.

All the perceived progress we had made in that meeting evaporated with one sentence. The room felt heavy, as if the air had been sucked out. His refusal to acknowledge any fault shut down the conversation.

Eventually, we went our separate ways. But to this day, that conflict remains unresolved. It's a painful reminder that without humility, reconciliation is nearly impossible. When we refuse to examine our own hearts, we build walls instead of bridges.

If we're to prepare our hearts so that conflict can be turned into fruitful conversations, we must take time to self-reflect and acknowledge our sin.

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). This verse is a sobering call to honesty. Self-reflection isn't about wallowing in guilt but about aligning ourselves with truth. When we own our sin—whether it's pride, anger, or selfishness—we open the door to repentance, forgiveness, and healing.

To practice self-reflection, try this exercise: Before entering a difficult conversation, spend a few moments in prayer, asking God to reveal your sin. Write down any attitudes, words, or actions that may have contributed to the conflict. Be specific. Then, confess these to God and, if appropriate, to the other person. This act of humility can diffuse tension and set the stage for a fruitful conversation.

### *3. Seek Godly Wisdom*

It's a foolish endeavor to assume you don't need the wisdom of others. Proverbs 26 is a unique one. The first eleven verses are devoted to describing the terrible state of a fool, and then, to make an emphatic point, Solomon says in verse 12, "Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him."

Don't miss that.

There's more hope for a fool than for someone who believes themselves to be sufficiently wise. To help that point sink in, consider the vivid imagery of Proverbs 26:1-11. Based on these eleven verses, fools:

- Should receive lashes instead of honor
- Should be granted no response to their arguments (unless, of course, it's to remind them of their foolishness)
- Should not be entrusted with important messages
- Should never speak a proverb
- Should not be employed

The fool is painted as utterly unreliable, yet Solomon says there's more hope for the fool than for someone who trusts in their own wisdom. Why? Because self-reliance blinds us to our need for God and others.

The good news is that wisdom is freely and generously given to those who ask God for it (Jas. 1:5). This promise is a lifeline for conflict resolution. When we're unsure how to proceed, God invites us to ask for his wisdom, and He promises to provide it. This wisdom isn't just intellectual knowledge; it's practical, godly insight that leads to peace (Jas. 3:17).

Oftentimes, the way God provides that wisdom is through faithful brothers and sisters that he's placed around you. So, if you haven't already joined a local church, do so! It's a hub of godly wisdom! Make deep friendships there, and then to grow in wisdom, do the following:

- Continue to ask God for wisdom (Prov. 2:6-7; Jas. 1:5)
- Consistently spend time in the Bible, knowing that's where true wisdom is found (Prov. 2:1-5)
- Ask fellow church members to share the wisdom they've accumulated
- Ask other Christians outside of your church for wisdom
- Utilize Christian resources to grow in wisdom (books, articles, podcasts, videos, etc.)

As a final word of clarity on this point, we must be careful when speaking with others (especially other church members) about the person we're in conflict with. We want to make sure our words don't bring harm to that person's name or reputation.

Seeking wisdom doesn't mean gossiping or slandering the other party. When consulting others, focus on your own heart and actions, not on airing the other person's faults. For example, instead of saying, "They're being unreasonable," you might say, "I'm struggling to respond patiently in this situation—can you help me see where I might be wrong?" This approach honors God and protects the unity of Christ's body.

To apply this, consider identifying one or two trusted believers who can offer godly counsel. Share your situation honestly but discreetly, and ask for their insight. I've done this in my own conflicts. I'll gladly reach out to many brothers for general counsel (Prov. 11:14), but to ensure discretion, I'll only share specific details with some (typically fellow elders). Their wisdom has often helped me see blind spots and approach conversations with greater clarity and grace.

## **Discussion Questions:**

1. When in conflict, do you find it difficult to see your own fault? Who is in your life who can help you see where you may be erring?
2. Do you find it easy or hard to talk to God about conflict in your life?
3. What is an example where you sought wisdom and the Lord provided, whether through time in his word or with his people?
4. How has your own willingness to apologize and receive forgiveness helped heal conflict? Are you willing to forgive others? Why is doing so hard?

## Part IV: Having the Conversation

We've discussed how conflict arises and why God may be allowing it to take place. After preparing our hearts for the conversation, we'll now take time to consider some practical steps that can help our conversations be fruitful ones.

### 1. Don't Wait

Jesus encourages his followers to resolve conflict as soon as possible (Matt. 5:23-24; Eph. 4:26-27). Once you realize you're in conflict, it's important to address it immediately. Failing to do so only allows a root of bitterness to spring up and wreak havoc (Heb. 12:15). Unfortunately, I've experienced this firsthand in my own life, hoping an issue would resolve itself. Instead, the silence allowed resentment to grow, making the eventual conversation far more painful.

### 2. Be Clear

Clarity is kindness. This principle applies both before your conversation and during your conversation.

Beforehand, when you request to meet, make your intentions for the meeting clear. Far better to be upfront than for the other party to be left wondering if this is about your conflict or not. Ambiguity can heighten anxiety or lead to misunderstandings, setting the conversation off on the wrong foot.

Instead of saying, "Hey John, let's grab coffee soon!", try something like, "Hey John, I know we've had some disagreements over our recent project. Can we discuss it over coffee soon?" Vague, speculative requests amid conflict can create confusion or suspicion. Be specific about the purpose of the meeting to honor the other person and set the stage for a productive discussion.

During your conversation, make your points clear. If you believe you've been sinned against, make sure the other party is aware of that. If you believe they're in sin, don't beat around that. Whatever you believe is the source of conflict, shine the light on it so both parties can clearly see. I've made the mistake of not being sufficiently clear, and it only caused greater pain for everyone involved.

Consider writing down your main points before stepping into the conversation. This will help you articulate your concerns without rambling or dodging the issue. Clarity isn't about being harsh; it's about being honest in a way that invites understanding and resolution.

### 3. Avoid Small Talk

When you sit down to have the conversation, it's best to jump right into the issue at hand. Don't try to build up to it. Both parties know what's going on, and the small talk will feel manipulative, disingenuous, and could raise suspicion. It can also waste valuable time, prolonging the tension for both of you.

By avoiding small talk, you're able to get to the heart of the matter sooner. This allows you both to have more time in the conversation to recover from the initial blow, and you'll be able to devote some of that time toward reconciliation.

A practical way to do this is with a brief, gracious opener that acknowledges the purpose (and potential awkwardness) of the meeting. You could say something like, "Thanks for meeting with me. I know this probably isn't how you wanted to spend your lunch hour, but I was hoping we could talk about what's going on, try to understand each other better, and find a way forward." This sets a focused, honest tone, paving the way for a fruitful discussion.

#### *4. Listen Well*

If we're going to have a fruitful conversation with anyone—let alone someone we're in conflict with—we need to be good listeners. Listening well is an act of love, demonstrating that we value the other person's perspective and are willing to set aside our own assumptions. It's not just about hearing words but seeking to understand the heart behind them.

Consider the work of a detective. After concluding that a crime was committed, he begins identifying persons of interest. From there, he asks questions. One after the other, question upon question. Taking plenty of notes along the way. All in an attempt to better understand what exactly happened. A good detective doesn't assume guilt, but gathers evidence carefully, listening to every detail before forming a conclusion.

A bad detective will jump to a conclusion at the first piece of uncovered evidence. A good detective knows better. He knows to keep asking questions.

When we find ourselves in conflict with others, we'll be tempted to approach them with suspicion. But remember, it's unhelpful to jump to conclusions without first asking questions. Let Proverbs 18:13 be your guide: "If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame." This verse is a sobering reminder that premature judgments not only hinder resolution but also dishonor God.

We have an obligation to listen before pronouncing a judgment. After sharing your concerns early in the conversation, acknowledge the possibility that you may not have all the necessary information. You can do this by asking questions such as:

1. "Based on what I've said, is it possible that I've misunderstood the situation?"
2. "Is what I shared an accurate assessment of what's occurred?"
3. "Am I missing some key information?"
4. "Have I represented the situation fairly?"

This list isn't exhaustive, but these questions convey a desire to honor Proverbs 18:13. Rather than jumping to conclusions, it shows a willingness to listen for anything that may have been missed and the humility to receive correction where needed.

A while back, I was discipling a young man who had run into some conflict with an older man in the church. They were set to talk in person, and I counseled the young man to enter the conversation with humility, assuming the older man was correct, to learn from him, and to be slow to speak.

To his credit, the young man received my counsel and approached the conversation humbly. To the older man's shame, he displayed less wisdom than I had anticipated. Rather than model Proverbs 18:13, seeking to truly understand his brother, he launched into accusations against the young man. He insisted he was in sin for disagreeing with his opinion. He thought he was operating with all the information necessary to form a judgment, but he never took the time to listen, which shut down any chance of resolution, leaving both of them frustrated. Rather than model the wisdom of Proverbs 18:13, he was an example of the fool in Proverbs 18:2, who "takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion."

Failing to listen is one of the quickest ways to shut down what otherwise could have been a fruitful conversation. As you enter into difficult conversations, approach them with enough humility to listen well. When both parties do this, the soil for conversation has an opportunity to bear much fruit.

#### *5. Speak the Truth in Love*

In all of this, it's important to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). To this day, I have friends who refuse to hear certain truths because someone shared those truths in a harsh and unloving manner. I'm not advocating for silence. But I am advocating that our speech reflects Proverbs 15:1, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." This balance is critical. Truth without love can cause deep wounds, while love without truth can enable sin. Speaking the truth in love requires both courage to address the issue and compassion to care for the person.

Despite what some may say, tone *does* matter. A harsh tone can escalate conflict, while a gentle tone can de-escalate it. Consider the individuals who have made the greatest impact in your life. Was their tone with you harsh or gentle?

Throughout the entire conflict, be sure to clearly communicate the truth in a way that reflects love for the ones you disagree with. This means choosing words that build up rather than tear down (Eph. 4:29). For example, instead of saying, "You're wrong," try saying, "I see it differently, but I want to understand your perspective. Help me out." This approach keeps the conversation constructive and reflects Christ's love, even in disagreement.

#### *6. Be Quick to Forgive*

Should the Lord bless the conversation, with the other party acknowledging sin and asking for forgiveness (Luke 17:3-4; Col. 3:13), be quick to forgive them! Withholding forgiveness is not only destructive to reconciliation, but it's also incompatible with Christianity (Matt. 6:14-15). Forgiveness is

at the heart of the gospel. Just as God has forgiven us through Christ's sacrifice, we are called to extend that same grace to others, even when it's hard.

God doesn't force us to wait when we plead for forgiveness. We're promised that whenever we request mercy, he grants it (1 John 1:9). Therefore, as sinners who have received God's forgiveness, we're also quick to extend it to those who have sinned against us (Matt. 6:12).

The mercy we've received in Christ has made us a new people (1 Pet. 2:10), a people who carry the good news of God's reconciling mercy to those around us. We're given the title, "ministers of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18). So, when those we have conflict with confess their sin and seek forgiveness, we respond the way our God and King does: with immediate forgiveness and joyful reconciliation (Luke 15:11-32)! The parable of the prodigal son illustrates this beautifully—the father runs to embrace his repentant son, not holding his sins against him. We're called to mirror that same extravagant grace in our relationships.

## *7. Follow the Process*

If your conflict is with a fellow church member, if the issue is sin-related, and if your conversation did not lead to repentance, it's important that you follow the process laid out by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20. In his wisdom, God has provided his church with a step-by-step guide for addressing unrepentant sin within the church. This process isn't about punishment but restoration, aiming to bring the erring brother or sister back into fellowship with God and the church.

If the other party refuses to acknowledge their sin, then your next step is to have another conversation with them, but this time bring one or two others (Matthew 18:16). The reason for this is so that others can help determine whether you're overreacting or if this is unrepentant sin that needs addressed. It's wise to reserve this for sins that are (1) verifiable, (2) significant, and (3) unrepentant.<sup>1</sup>

If your conflict is with a Christian who's a member at another church, depending on the degree of conflict, it may be helpful to reach out to one of his/her pastors. Those men have a responsibility to care for the souls under their charge, and if there's unrepentant sin they don't know about, then it would be helpful for them to know so that they can address it. Similar to the above, this should be reserved for sins that are verifiable, significant, and unrepentant.

If your conflict is with a non-Christian, I'd encourage you to discuss the matter with your pastor(s) for next steps. Conflicts with non-believers require wisdom, as they may not share your biblical values. Your pastor can help you discern whether to pursue further conversation, seek mediation, or simply entrust the matter to God (Rom. 12:18).

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<sup>1</sup> I'm indebted to Jonathan Leeman for these helpful filters.

If your conflict is related to criminal activity, I'd encourage you to contact the authorities and allow the state to exercise the authority God has granted it (Rom. 13). This would also be best conducted with the oversight of your pastor(s).

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Have you ever had a hard conversation go wrong? If so, how did it go wrong and why?
2. Which of the tips for having hard conversations above seems most difficult for you to apply to your own life, and why?
3. How does considering God's forgiveness for us help us extend forgiveness to others?
4. How does Jesus's wisdom in Matthew 18 help us handle conflict inside our churches?

## Conclusion

In Matthew 5:9, it's worth noting that Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are those who enjoy peace." Rather, he says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." In a fallen world, we experience conflict. But despite that conflict, we strive to *make* peace, and this takes work.

Sometimes, we work for peace by keeping aloof of strife (Prov. 20:3), by demonstrating a cool spirit (Prov. 17:27-28), by refusing to retaliate (1 Pet. 3:9), or by simply refusing to engage (Prov. 26:4; 29:9). These strategies are like choosing not to add fuel to a fire.

Still other times, despite our best efforts, we find ourselves in conflict. It's in these times that we're reminded of our calling to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18). By acting promptly, speaking clearly, listening well, and extending forgiveness, we create opportunities for God to work through our conversations. These steps aren't easy, but they're worth it. They transform fights into fruitful conversations that glorify God and strengthen relationships. May we approach every conflict with the humility and grace of our Savior, trusting him to guide us toward peace.