

Christians in Conflict

A Bible Study About Peacemaking

An Adult Bible Study

by

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Leader's Guide

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Northwestern Publishing House
1250 N. 113th St., Milwaukee, WI 53226-3284
www.nph.net

© 2014 Northwestern Publishing House
Published 2014
ISBN 978-0-8100-2601-8

INTRODUCTION

Got conflict? Foolish question! We all experience conflict. It shatters lives, causes wars, foments hatred, generates violence, divides congregations, ends marriages, destroys businesses, disrupts friendships, and wrecks health. Even a minor confrontation on the freeway can make us miserable, turning our thoughts dark with rage. What causes all this conflict? What do we really know about the anatomy of conflict? And how does God want us to react to conflict? This practical, eight-lesson course gives an in-depth look at what God has to say about conflict. It will lead us to apply biblical conflict-resolving principles to our own lives and to consider how every Christian can become a vital part of a culture of peace.

For the Leader

This course is organized into eight lessons. The material is designed for teens, parents, pastors, and Christian school faculties. An informed lay member would feel comfortable leading it. Detailed notes have been included in the Leader's Guide. Each lesson is introduced with a set of learning objectives. A brief worship reading from a psalm or hymn verse introduces the theme for each lesson. Every lesson ends with an opportunity for one member of the group to lead an *ex corde* prayer.

Discussions about conflict can, at times, become intensely personal. Encourage open and direct conversations. Anecdotal narratives are helpful in moving the lessons along and keeping the content of the course interesting. But you should also remind students that private matters must remain confidential.

ASSUMPTIONS

As an introduction to the course, you may wish to discuss the following assumptions with students:

- 1. Some kinds of conflict are healthy and can lead to good outcomes.** Serious debate, positive discussions, challenging scholarly research, and arguments in a court of law are often beneficial forms of conflict. They can engage people in ways that will lead to valuable insights and healthy outcomes.
- 2. The conflicts on which we are focusing in this course are not God-pleasing.** These conflicts are driven by *lovelessness* and godless desires. They generally tear relationships apart, impede the spread of the gospel, and undermine our ministry to one another.
- 3. God often works through conflict for the good of his people.** We have his promise that he will work through the events in our lives for our eternal good and his gracious purposes (Romans 8:28). But this is not an invitation to create or promote conflict.
- 4. God's approach to resolving conflict, healing broken hearts, and restoring people to peaceful relationships with himself and one another transcends all human strategies for resolving or managing conflict.** The model of reconciliation and healing through forgiveness is a reflection of the plan God carried out for us in the sacrificial life and

death of his own Son on Calvary's cross. Reconciliation and the patient steps that biblical church discipline follows rise above all other conflict-resolution strategies.

5. In a sinful world, some conflicts cannot be avoided. Even among Christians, there are those situations in which conflict is simply unavoidable or even necessary.

Lesson One

What Causes Conflict?

Learning Objectives for Lesson One

- Know that our relationships are a gift from our loving Creator-God.
- Make a distinction between the believer's approach to conflict and the unbeliever's.
- Review the Lutheran concept of old Adam/new man as it applies to conflict and peacemaking.
- Examine the four phases of the origins of conflict:
 1. *self-serving obsession*
 2. *distortion*
 3. *judging*
 4. *punishing*
- Note the importance of dealing with a growing conflict as early as possible.

Worship

Leader: In his Word, God warns us not to let our anger lead us into sin.

Group: Instead, when we are on our beds, he urges us,

L: "In silence search your hearts."

G: We pray, O Lord, let the light of your face shine on us.

L: You have filled our hearts with joy. We lie down and sleep in peace.

G: You alone, O Lord, make us live in safety.

Based on Psalm 4

1.1 "Not Good!"

1. Describe a relationship in your life that you cherish as a very special blessing.

Invite several class members to think of a relationship that is challenging and difficult.

Read Genesis chapter 1 and 2:18.

2. A common refrain echoes through the verses of Genesis chapter 1: "The light was good. . . . It was good. . . . It was good. . . . It was good. . . . God saw that it was good. . . . It was very good." Contrast that with Genesis 2:18.

God observed that it isn't good for man to be alone.

3. After seven emphatic repetitions of the thought that all things were “good” or “very good,” what is the significance of the “not good” in chapter 2, verse 18?

Moses (the inspired author of Genesis) reports that God declared his creation to be good seven times in the first few pages of the Bible. It is rather startling, then, to see a “not good.” This signals a change in the direction of the narrative. The God of our creation is about to teach us something wonderful about himself and about us. Our God—three persons, yet one God—is himself a relational being. He created people for relationships, both with himself and with other human beings. From eternity God planned how he would provide a loving human relationship for Adam by creating Eve as his companion. At the time he spoke these words, his plan for creation wasn't complete. He continues to plan for us to enjoy the relationships we have in our own lives. He blesses each of us with parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, a spouse, friends, acquaintances, fellow workers, neighbors, etc. (It would not be good if our conflicts kept us from having meaningful and satisfying relationships with others.)

4. How did the fall into sin spoil the blessings God intended for all human relationships?

Sin created a climate in which our relationships became, at times, troublesome and difficult. Given the heartache and disappointment that some of our human relationships represent, it is fair to say we frequently forget that these relationships were given to us as a blessing and for our good.

1.2 Cain and Abel

Read Genesis 4:1-15.

5. What was Cain's underlying problem?

God accepted Abel's offerings, but rejected Cain's. Jealousy was certainly part of Cain's problem. It also appears that Cain lacked self-control and was prone to rage. He clearly lacked respect for the life of a fellow human being. But behind it all, Cain did not trust God to keep his promise to Adam and Eve. He didn't bring his offering with humble faith. He saw himself as a self-made man who really had no need for a Savior-God. Cain believed that he deserved God's good favor. And he wanted a god who would bend to his own terms. In other words, Cain was an unbeliever. He worshiped himself and his abilities to survive. Jesus described the attitude (or the *heart*) of all unbelievers over and against believers when he warned his disciples that all people would hate them because of him (**Matthew 10:22**).

6. Evaluate: In his rising conflict, Cain focused on the wrong target for his anger.

Cain may have blamed Abel for nudging him out of first place in God's eyes. Or he may have hated God, wanting to hurt God because he had rejected his sacrifices. In any case, Cain took his anger out on his brother Abel rather than addressing the flaw in his own heart that rendered his sacrifice unacceptable.

7. When we are in conflict with others, we often set ourselves up as judge and jury (and judge others harshly) in order to justify our anger and our own loveless actions. Demonstrate how such judging contributed to Cain's downfall.

Cain judged Abel's actions to be the cause of the breakdown of his own relationship with God and the cause of his own unhappiness. In his own mind, he felt justified in killing Abel.

8. Agree or Disagree: There is some of both Cain and Abel in each of us. (Also see **Galatians 5:17-26.**)

The statement is more true than false. In **Galatians 5:17-26**, the apostle Paul provides a contrasting look at the two spiritual natures that are still in conflict within each one of us. Our old Adam continues to be a problem for us. And it will be until we are safely in heaven. In that respect we are still like Cain. It was Cain's old Adam that led to his envy, rage, and violence. In moments of weakness, our old Adam urges us to let envy, rage, and violence become the driving forces in our lives. Abel, on the other hand, worshiped his Savior-God in sincere humility, trusting that the Lord's promise would be fulfilled in time. His heart beat in rhythm with the heartbeat of his loving God. As believers in Jesus, you and I are *new creatures*; the new man in us is in charge, driving our thoughts, words, and deeds. Our new man works at putting sin and temptation aside. But when tension and conflict are in the wind, our old Adam is often given a foothold in our lives and can once again become a dominant spiritual force.

1.3 The Four Stages of Conflict

As conflict developed in the relationship between Cain and his brother Abel, it passed through several stages, or phases. Though each conflict situation is unique, certain phases are commonly observed in conflicted relationships.

Read James 4:1-3.

9. To what does the apostle James point as the source of all conflict?

James says that we have “desires that battle within.” For a Christian, the old Adam and the new man in Christ engage in a constant internal struggle for control (**Galatians 5:17**). If our old Adam prevails, we will fixate on serving self rather than living in thankful and loving service to God and others.

10. What distinguishes godly wanting from sinful wanting?

James points to our motivation as a test. The criteria for determining if the things we want are God-pleasing is this question: *Am I asking in order to gratify my own desires?* If our motives are selfish and self-serving rather than focused on how our requests will be a blessing for us spiritually or for the church, our wanting is not God-pleasing. (**Also see Matthew 6:10b.**)

11. Evaluate: Anyone who stands in the way of me getting what I want is a potential enemy.

Even selfish wanting does not always end up in conflict. The actual conflict begins when we begin to personalize those sinful desires and identify the individuals who stand in our way of getting what we want.

STAGE ONE

I obsess over (or fixate on) my own selfish desires and interests.

Read Galatians 6:3-5.

12. In what ways can we deceive ourselves when we set our own selfish agendas?

By putting ourselves and our desires ahead of God's will, it becomes more difficult for us to see the truth in an objective way. Then it is relatively easy to twist the truth in

ways that will suit our own sinful purposes. This tendency to distort the truth about ourselves and others is the second stage in a growing conflict.

We can deceive ourselves into believing that we are better than others. We may buy into the lie that says we have the authority or the right to judge others. We may decide to deconstruct the objective facts and spin those facts in a way that better matches our agenda.

STAGE TWO

I distort the truth about myself or my adversary to suit my own selfish agenda.

13. What are some devious ways to twist the truth about an enemy to put that person in a bad light?

The Eighth Commandment comes into play during stage two of the growing pattern of conflict. **(See Exodus 20:16.)** We may constantly remind others of our enemy's weaknesses and flaws.

One conflict management expert says that we generally tend to think of an enemy as being *insignificant, subhuman, irrelevant, foolish, wrongheaded, dishonest, and/or dishonorable*. We may even think of the enemy as *an object* rather than as a fellow human being. In contrast, we tend to deceive ourselves into believing that *we* are always *wise, right, and honest*. Seeing our enemy, or ourselves, in this distorted way leads us also to believe the lie that we have the right to treat our enemy with indifference or impatience. Such an attitude easily gives way to the greater lie that says we have a right and the authority to judge the enemy's motives and punish him or her for wrongs. (*Leadership and Self-Deception*, The Arbinger Institute [n.p.: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2000].)

Read James 4:11,12.

14. What really is going on when we judge an enemy?

When we judge someone, we are setting ourselves above that person, taking on a role that only God has the authority to exercise. In the process, we can also see ourselves rising to a position that is effectively above the law (another lie).

STAGE THREE

I self-righteously judge the behaviors, words, or motives of my enemy.

15. Evaluate: There is nothing wrong with judging a wrongdoer.

We make a judgment every time we step into a voting booth. We are required to use our best judgment when choosing a church, a school for our children, the kind of work we do, etc. Some social roles—a judge in a court of law, members of a jury, or a parent or teacher disciplining an erring child—require people to make judgments about the motives and behaviors of others. God delegates these roles. The authority of these individuals is limited to, and flows from, God's authority over all things. He is the final judge and the only judge that matters for eternity. One problem when we

judge others is that, in reality, we are trying to justify our hatred of or loveless actions toward the person we are judging.

We live in a society that is immersed in the media deception that promotes the idea that we all have a God-given right to judge the motives of our fellow human beings. This distortion of our constitutional rights creates an environment in which conflict actually thrives. (Conflict is generally welcomed and encouraged by the popular media. Without conflict there is no story to grip people's attentions.) In some ways the democratic value of free speech clashes with Jesus' words in **Matthew 7:1**, which command us not to judge.

In the fourth and final stage, our wrongheaded judgments give way to punishing the enemy.

Read Genesis 16:1-6.

16. Look for examples of the various stages of conflict in this triangular conflict involving Sarai, Hagar, and Abram.

Stage one: Sarai seems to be obsessed with the idea of providing an heir for her husband. Stage two: She also seems to be blaming God when she should be trusting his promise. This is her distorted way of looking at her situation and leads her to take matters into her own hands by giving Hagar to her husband to bed. One has to wonder, does Sarai not realize that her plan opposes God's plan? She fanatically spins the truth in a way that will suit her own purpose. Stage three: She further twists it by saying that Abram is the cause of all the heartache when the whole idea was hers from the beginning.

Consider also how Hagar and Abram contribute to the tangled web of sin. Hagar despises her mistress. Abram turns a blind eye to the hateful relationship that is growing between Sarai and Hagar.

Finally, the whole affair spins out of control and enters stage four when Sarai mistreats Hagar—an unjust punishment that forces Hagar and her son, Ishmael, to flee from Abram's household into the desert.

STAGE FOUR

I punish others who dare to oppose me, even as I have judged them.

17. *Dysfunctional* is a popular term used to describe a unit of society (such as a family) that is no longer able to function as a unit. In your opinion, why are conflict and dysfunction frequently connected?

People living in the middle of a serious personal conflict find it hard to think about much else. In conflict it can be almost impossible for life to go on in a normal, functional way. It is also true that dysfunction can cause conflict. Where there is a breakdown in communication, self-discipline, structure, routine, or justice, conflict may be just another component in a situation that could be correctly described as dysfunctional.

1.4 The Don't-Let-the-Sun-Set-on-Your-Anger Principle

Read Ephesians 4:26.

The conflict that occurred in Abram's household may have damaged or destroyed the faith of one or more individuals. It may also have hindered opportunities for members of his household to live lives of loving, godly compassion for one another.

18. The Bible tells us that a growing conflict is an urgent matter that requires immediate attention. Early intervention might have been able to keep the situation in Abram's household from spinning out of control and into a costly conflict.

Consider *when*, *how*, and *who* should have stepped in to correct the course of this growing conflict.

Ideally, Abram should have stepped in at Sarai's suggestion that Abram have a child through her servant girl. He should have reminded Sarai of God's promise and his ability to keep his promise. Later, when Sarai blamed Abram for the trouble, he again could have talked about God's promise and the meaning of that promise and pointed to their joint sin of not trusting God to carry out his promise. When Sarai began to mistreat Hagar, Abram should have pointed out her sin.

Read Matthew 5:22-24.

19. Why does God place such urgency on resolving disputes as soon as possible?

One reason for such urgency is that wherever sin is involved, souls are at risk. Another reason is that God wants to bless his people with the peace that comes from being reminded that Jesus died also to remove the guilt of those sins we commit while we are engaged in conflict. The People's Bible *Matthew* says the following:

There is such a thing as righteous anger, which is concerned about God's honor and God's truth, but here Jesus speaks about sinful anger, which is concerned about revenge and may involve hatred. Such anger may not even be evident to other people, but God is aware of it, and it deserves God's punishment. It is difficult to translate accurately the word Raca and the word Jesus used for "You fool," but it is evident that the latter expression is more vicious than the preceding one. . . . What Jesus illustrates here is that even sinful desires or evil words that fall short of the act of murder are transgressions of God's commandment and deserve the severest punishment. . . . So don't approach God in prayer or in worship with anger in your heart or with righteous anger in someone else's heart against you. If you have wronged someone, go to that person and attempt to be reconciled before approaching the Lord's altar. Unrepented sin is a barrier to any kind of God-pleasing worship, and these words are appropriately applied to our preparation for receiving the Lord's Supper. . . . The thing to do is to "settle matters quickly with your adversary," the person you have offended. Do it before you even appear in front of the judge. (Matthew, of The People's Bible series [Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000], pp. 74,75.)

There is a third reason for such urgency: Jesus wants us to be united in genuine fellowship with our Christian brothers and sisters. In his High Priestly Prayer (**John 17:20-23**), Jesus explains why this unity is so important, saying that through

this unity, the world (unbelievers) knows that he was sent from God and that God loves believers even as God loves him.

The Don't-Let-the-Sun-Set-on-Your-Anger Principle

Conflict is an urgent matter. Make it a priority to seek healing for a broken relationship.

Closing Prayer

In the light of the discussions we have had in Lesson One, what thoughts would you like to include in our closing prayer?