

I. Introduction: Conflict in our homes

It's an honor and a privilege to speak to you tonight. Our topic this evening follows the pattern of the other topics in the Family Enrichment conference – it addresses a movement from something to something else. Tonight our topic is “From Conflict to Reconciliation”.

Every parent here prefers their kids to behave at church. There's no way you can avoid your kids sinning at church – but... we'd all prefer if they were on their best behavior! It's a lot easier to deal with a wailing toddler at home in your living room than during the shepherd's prayer on Sunday morning. It's also easier to deal with a sarcastic response from your teen at home than in front of their friends at church.

Maybe you don't feel pressure to control your kids at church. Maybe you don't stress over their behavior. I hope that doesn't consume you, but it can be a real temptation – for kids of all ages. Regardless of where you find yourself, or what season God is leading you through in parenting, none of our homes are free from conflict. Some of you are feeling pretty discouraged right now, or have felt discouraged recently because of how much arguing, fighting, and selfishness you see in your children. Some of it is directed against each other and some against you. Some of you are living in a nearly constant state of tension with a frayed or broken relationship with a young person in your home, and at the same time are probably also wrestling with sin and frustration in your own heart.

I grew up in a home with 4 siblings – 3 brothers and a sister. Some of our brother-to-brother relationships pretty well defined the term “sibling rivalry” for many years, and I was in the middle of it. I remember one year in high school some of my siblings (including me) started getting a ride to school with a classmate. That only lasted a semester... Our classmate's mom didn't want to take us anymore because she was so annoyed with our constant fighting! Although none of us openly rebelled against my parents during the teen years, we had our fair share of conflict over many issues.

Parenting teens inevitably involves conflict. With or without other children in the mix, when children grow into young adulthood, conflict can't be entirely avoided. As teens grow, they will naturally and rightly gravitate away from their parents and toward their peer group. This is part of growing up and preparing to leave the home. However, this is not an excuse for sin. In some homes, and in some stages of life, calm and peace are the norm; but in many homes fighting, arguing, and sullen silence are commonplace.

When we think of conflict what comes to mind is usually verbal and physical fighting – lashing out at other people in anger. However, conflict can also be expressed in other ways. In its most basic form, conflict is just two people who have a problem with each other. It's the opposite of unity or peace in a relationship. Conflict can result in physical and verbal confrontations, but it also often results in people avoiding each other - living in different rooms and hardly talking.

Being in a relationship marked by conflict can be compared to standing waist-deep in a stormy sea. You just catch your breath, and then another wave crashes into you out of nowhere. There seems to be no escape or way of preventing the next conflict. As worrisome as the situation above the water is, though, there is also danger below the water: shifting sand and strong tides threaten to sweep you off your feet.

In this analogy, the storm on the surface is the external situation in conflict – the people, situations, words and actions. However, there is another side of conflict as well – what’s going on in our hearts. The undertow of our heart desires, worship and reliance, identity and sources of strength are the foundation from which we live. Whatever we look to for strength and identity in the storm of conflict will either give us stability or trip us up even more.

Some storms are worse than others. Some parents and teens have only minor conflicts, while others rage out of control and involve harmful life choices and dangerous behavior. Regardless of where you find yourself as a parent today, or even if you are not a parent, there is a common core of truth in the Bible that we can apply to every situation of conflict.

II. The Source of Conflict

In the teen years, many things can lead to conflict with parents: disagreements over curfew, what movies can be watched, what music can be listened to, driving privileges, after-school activities, and dating. These are just a few issues parents and teens may disagree about. But the triggers for conflict are much wider. Here are a few more things that can lead to irritation:

- Youthful energy and enthusiasm
- Folly and impulsiveness
- Intentional provoking and pushing buttons
- Criticism and judgment of behaviors, beliefs, actions
- Misunderstandings
- Unreasonable expectations from parents
- Inconsistency and unfairness
- Selfishness from parents or teens
- Desires for independence
- Disrespect
- Laziness
- Lack of Compassion
- Use of God’s Word to instruct (well or poorly)
- Bringing up old sins
- Embarrassing a teen in front of their friends
- Even just basic personality differences can cause all kinds of tensions and annoyances. (may not appreciate the Myers-Briggs personality distinctions, but even the fact it’s possible shows that people vary greatly in their makeup and approach to life)

These potential occasions for conflict can be helpful to understand – especially in being aware of areas where we have a natural tendency to irritation and sin. But according to the Bible, when you get down to it – conflict is not really so complicated.

James 4:1-3 teaches us that fights and quarrels can be understood in much more basic terms: sinful conflict comes from desires battling within us. We want something, but we don’t get it – so we lash out at others:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

Parents want things. Teens want things. It's conflict between these desires that cause conflict between people. You can see this in toddlers fighting over a toy. They both want the toy, but they can't both have the toy; so they scream, hit each other, and try to pull it away from each other. This is worked out in only slightly more grown-up ways between parents and teens.

Desire in and of itself is not sin – the Bible assumes we will want things, and often encourages us to pursue and desire things. However, desire becomes sin when what we want becomes more important to us than God. Another way to talk about what causes sin is the term “idolatry”. An idol is anything we worship other than God. What we want may even be a good thing in and of itself, but if we want it more than God it ALWAYS corrupts and ultimately destroys us.

Sin dehumanizes the people around us. When we are worshipping an idol, we reduce people to whether or not they give us what we want, or get in the way of what we want. When they don't give us what we want or get in the way, we get mad. In relationships, the progression works something like this (from Peacemakers):

- Desire – I want something.
- Demand – I decide I need it and will do what it takes to get it.
- Judge – You don't give me what I want so I condemn you.
- Punish – I try to harm or offend you to teach you a lesson.

Example with parents and teens:

Teen: I want to watch this movie.

Parent: Sorry, we don't think you're old enough yet.

Teen: You never let me have any fun, all my friends can watch it.

Parent: Well, why do you always talk back? Maybe I'd give you more freedom if you were more respectful.

Teen: I wish I was born in another family...

Parent: Believe me, some days I wish I could put you up for adoption.

What does the teen desire here? Freedom to watch a movie and be like friends. What does the parent desire? Respect and obedience. These are not inherently bad desires. However, we can see that these desires have become idols for them because of the way they try to punish each other when they don't get what they want.

Not all disagreement or tension is sinful. It's not necessarily wrong for the teen to ask about watching the movie, or for the parent and teen to disagree. In fact, disagreements are unavoidable as teens grow into an adult identity and responsibility. However, in this case the disagreement took a clear turn into sinful conflict when the teen began disrespecting his/her parent's authority and both tried to hurt the other with their words.

2 Cor. 5:15 says “and He (*Jesus*) died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” Jesus came that we would no longer live for ourselves, because naturally, that's the way we all live. We are naturally filled with strong desires, and will sin and fight to get what we want or sin and grumble when we don't get what we want.

III. Attitudes of the Heart in Conflict

Going back to the picture of standing in the ocean in a storm - the wind and waves on the surface (actions and words of conflict) are bad enough, but what goes on under the water (in our hearts) is key to responding in a godly way in conflict.

The simple source of conflict is our desires. However, we are also a sea of other emotions in relational conflict: Pain, guilt, fear, shame, anger, entitlement, confusion, hopelessness, weakness, feeling like a failure, belittled and offended. In the storm of emotions, we naturally tend to focus on the faults of the other person and remain blind to our own. The experience of conflict is often very confusing. Sometimes we are consumed with introspection, but all too often we spend time away from the other person rehearsing how wrong they are, hating them, and telling them off in our mind.

In conflict, it is easy to focus on what the other person has done wrong – how wrong your teen is, for example. In Luke 12:13-15 Jesus is approached by a man who wants help him settle a dispute with his brother about their inheritance. It sounds noble – there is a conflict, and this man wants to resolve it with Jesus’ help. But what does Jesus say to him? “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?... 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions'. Jesus called this man to look away from the sin of the other person, and in the midst of conflict examine his own heart. The most important thing in the situation was not that this man would get what was “fair” or “right”, but that he would honor and obey God in his actions and attitudes.

How can we honor God in our heart attitudes? How does a heart motivated by worshipping God respond in conflict? We’re going to look at a passage that describes a heart transformed by the gospel: a heart of Biblical love. Biblical love is the opposite of self-centered idol worship. Instead, it is action motivated by God’s glory and a desire for the good of others.

In 1 Thess. 2:1-12, Paul describes his heart and approach while ministering in the midst of conflict:

You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. ² We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. ³ For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. ⁴ On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. ⁵ You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. ⁶ We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. ⁷ Instead, we were like young children^[a] among you.

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, ⁸ so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. ⁹ Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. ¹⁰ You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. ¹¹ For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, ¹² encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

Let’s walk through the passage and see what Paul has to say:

- Notice the two places Paul compares himself to a parent: “as a nursing mother cares for her children” (7) and “as a father deals with his own children” (11). He is saying his behavior was like a father or mother’s should be.
- Paul says he had been treated “outrageously” in Philippi (many teens & parents can probably relate!), and despite that still dared to share the gospel in the face of strong opposition at Thessalonica (2). He persevered in the ministry God had given him in the face of great opposition.
- Notice Paul’s heart, motivations, and actions – in the midst of conflict:
 - His motives were pure and based on truth (3)
 - He spoke plainly, not trying to trick people and not trying to cover up his own greed (3,5)
 - His goal was to please God, not people. He did not look for praise from people. (4,6)
 - He did not use flattery and manipulation to get what he wanted (5)
 - He was gentle and sincerely cared for them (7,8)
 - He loved them enough to share his life with them, not just tell them the gospel (8).
 - He worked overtime to not inconvenience them with his needs (9).
 - He had a good conscience from living “holy, righteous, and blameless” before them (10).
 - The basis of his encouraging, comforting and admonishing them was God’s worth, kingdom and glory (12).
- Paul’s heart was motivated and grounded in God – not people, and he worked hard for the good of others.

In “Get Offa My Case” Rick Horne provides a summary of 4 attitudes of the heart that can help us keep our footing in the deep water of conflict:

- 1) Motivated by God’s Glory (Psalm 57:5 – example of David as he fled from Saul) – it’s all about Him, not us.
- 2) Encouraged by God’s Promises – e.g. there is no condemnation for us in Christ, God will work together all things in suffering for our good, He will never leave us or forsake us, He promises strength in our weakness, He is coming again to set everything right.
- 3) Instructed by God’s Word - willing to be wrong, always a learner, feeding on God’s Word.
- 4) Positioned by Prayer – prayer is humility and dependence in action, it is a divinely appointed channel for God’s grace and help.

Practice these things in your heart in conflict, pray that you may model them no matter how your children or others respond. Children are always watching. Teach these things to your children as young as you can in the conflicts they experience – at home first. Then as they grow and experience more outside the home, look for opportunities to counsel these things in the everyday flow of life.

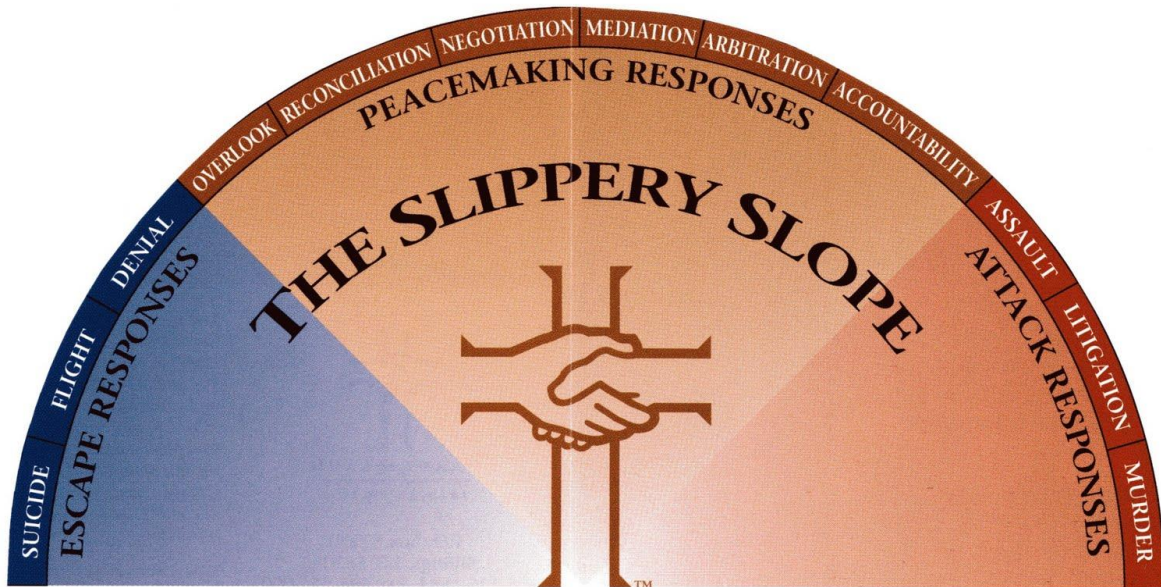
IV. Being a Peacemaker in Conflict

We’ve looked at our hearts in conflict, and how to work toward stabilizing our footing in the deep waters of conflict. Let’s look more now at the storm above water. How can we glorify God in handling conflicts, even if the other person is resistant?

Reconciliation – or restoring relationships between people - is near and dear to the heart of God: Matthew 5:9 – “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” In the middle of Romans 12, a passage about leaving vengeance with God, God’s word admonishes us “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (NIV)

However, this is often easier said than done. Conflict in the home is a special case where the people involved generally must stay in close contact and often don't have the luxury of distance or extended time away to reflect. In that situation, God's grace comes to help us in the midst of conflict.

Responses in conflict range from seeking to escape or run away on one extreme to attacking the person on the other (see the chart from Peacemakers below). In the middle are responses of Biblical love, aimed at restoring the relationship and making true peace.



Contrasts¹:

	Focus on:	May be called:	Frequently result in:
Escape responses	ME (protect self)	Peace-faking	Kiss Your Relationship Goodbye
Attack responses	YOU (make you pay)	Peace-breaking	Kiss Your Relationship Goodbye
Conciliation responses	US	Peace-making	Reconciliation

Escape and attack responses tend to reinforce each other in a vicious cycle, with parents and teens responding in the same sinful ways over and over. As a parent, pray for grace to respond as a peacemaker. If needed, repent of either sinfully using your authority to manhandle your teen or of abdicating the role God has given you to actively shepherd and love.

Peacemakers summarizes the Bible's guidelines for working toward reconciliation with 4 G's²:

¹ from Russ Kennedy Counseling Training Materials

² http://www.peacemaker.net/site/c.aqKFLTOBIPH/b.958149/k.303A/The_Four_Gs.htm

1. Glorify God – this life is not a story about us, it’s a story about God. We were made to live for the glory of another – the one who made us and has saved us.
2. Get the log out of your own eye – In Matthew 7:5, Jesus explains how to deal with conflict, including this command: “You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.” Be sensitive to the state of your own heart when moving to confront someone else. Pray for the Spirit’s help to see sin in your own heart, and take time to reflect. If you do find sin in your own heart, confess it to God and your teen and turn away from it.
3. Gently restore – In Matthew 18:15 Jesus tells us, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.” If we must confront our teens with sin, we should go gently, with a heart wanting to restore a relationship rather than make a point or punish. It is preferable to overlook a matter wherever possible (Proverbs 19:11).
4. Go and be reconciled – Though a teen may not respond well to our approach, our goal and heart should be to see the relationship restored. That requires a mix of patience and persistence. Choose to be active and involved, and always extend the offer true forgiveness. Following the guidelines of Matthew 18, involve others if needed. As believers, we have had forgiveness modelled to us in the most powerful way – someone has taken the punishment that we deserved in order to forgive and welcome us back into relationship. Forgiveness is not something we can do in our own strength, but it is something God will give us grace to do when we ask Him for it.

V. Reconciliation and True Peace

The goal of our interaction in conflict is repentance and reconciliation – a restored relationship. This comes through repentance and forgiveness from both persons involved: confessing and asking forgiveness for the ways we have sinned against others, and forgiving those who sin against us. What does it mean to forgive as Christ has forgiven us? It means freely and completely. Peacemakers has summarized the practical implications of Biblical forgiveness in the form of four promises:

1. "I will not dwell on this incident."
2. "I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you."
3. "I will not talk to others about this incident."
4. "I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship."

But what if our children never repent, or don’t forgive us? How can we live in a God-glorifying way, even if the conflict continues for a long time? Paul David Tripp explains a godly response in this way:

“I would love there to be resolution and reconciliation in our relationship. But I don’t need your forgiveness [*or repentance*]. I don’t need your forgiveness to get up the next day and be who I’m supposed to be and do what I’m supposed to do. I don’t need you to forgive me in order to love you. I get my power to love vertically; I don’t get it horizontally. You are not the spiritual battery that I hook myself to.”

Broken relationships are painful, but they don’t have to spiritually paralyze us. In the gospel, we have all we need to live in an unforgiving world at the foot of the cross of Christ. I love one of the choruses we sang this morning – “You are my shield, my strength, my portion, deliverer, my shelter, strong tower, my very present help in time of need”. God is our refuge and strength, He gives our souls a place to hide in the middle of conflict. We can trust in God’s sovereignty and love – believing and accepting that it is for His glory and our good that God has chosen to put us in this situation. It means accepting that this is God’s plan for our lives, at least for now. And in the meantime, “I can get all that I need to be okay

spiritually - to be who I need to be, and do what I need to do – vertically.” I do not look for it horizontally.³

“Be Reconciled to God”

Why do we have conflict? We have conflict because we desire created things – the things and people we can see, touch, taste, smell and hear (Rom. 1); instead of the glorious God who created us. For those of you who have never repented of your sin and put your faith in Christ – you are defined by idolatry. All day, every day you worship created things instead of God. You are incapable of worshipping God, or responding in a God-honoring way in conflict. And God’s holy anger is against you. You are in constant conflict with God, which causes conflict with other people in large and small ways.

For those of us who have repented of our sins and become God’s children – we still have much idolatry in our lives that results in sinful conflict. However, the good news is that this no longer defines us. It is not our identity. Christ’s work on the cross has given us perfect standing with God, and He has unleashed His Spirit’s power in our lives to make us like Christ. When we confess our sin, he is faithful to forgive us and cleanse us (1 John 1:9). We worship God, and are able to because He has given us a new heart. How do we grow in responding Biblically to conflict? We need only grow up into what God has made us. We do this by laying hold of the grace God freely offers his children.

I read 2 Cor. 5:15 earlier – “and He (*Jesus*) died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” Let’s continue reading that passage in verse 17:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.²⁰ We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (NIV)

We need to be reunited with the Father. Our lives are a mess apart from Him. So how do we get that blessing? By Christ taking our sin on himself so that we could be righteous. God the Father made Jesus (His innocent son) to be sin for us, that we might become the walking, talking manifestation of the righteousness of God: God’s perfection, rightness, and mercy. We are brought into that blessing by repenting of our sin and putting our faith in Christ’s work. Christ died so we could be God’s righteousness in our homes, including in the hardest times, in the midst of the conflict that does come and will come. We can honor God and hold out the good news about the cross of Christ that has given us peace with God. Holding out God’s promise of reconciliation in Christ is the heart of Christian parenting. Because of the gospel, we can live in hope in even the most difficult situations with our teens. God is still at work bringing sinners home, and growing His children into the likeness of Christ. We can trust God’s power in the gospel to transform our children as it is transforming us.

³ “Relational Conflict and Forgiveness: Paul David Tripp”. Interview on Youtube