

Fundamentals of Family:  
“Conflict Resolution”  
Colossians 3:12-17

Dr. J. Howard Olds  
January 20, 2008

To live above with those we love,  
Well, that will be glory.  
To live below with those we know,  
Well, that’s another story.

Wherever two or more people gather in the close quarters of family, church, work, or community, conflict is bound to happen. The Bible affirms that from cover to cover. Jacob did not get along with Esau. King Saul tried to kill David. St. Paul wanted nothing to do with his former traveling companion Mark. The letters of the New Testament are full of advice on resolving difficulties.

So, I want to offer some thoughts today about conflict resolution. This is not a seven point plan for resolving all differences. It is a few hints from life about getting along with one another.

**BE FACTUAL**

As a kid, one of my favorite TV shows was Dragnet, where Sergeant Joe Friday regularly said to people, “Just the facts ma’am, just the facts.” Relationships grounded in the truth are helpful to all.

So, the first principle of conflict resolution is stop pretending, stop denying, end the cover ups, quit diminishing the facts.

Dad has more than a headache every night; he is drinking too much. Mom is more than tired when she sleeps all the time; she is depressed. Johnny’s friends are not responsible for his drug use. Johnny is responsible.

In Psalm 51, when King David starts to confess his sins against Uriah and Bathsheba, he begins by saying that God desires truth in the most inner parts of our being. Honesty with ourselves is a first step toward freedom. We do not help ourselves or others by living in the darkness of denial. Somebody needs to turn up the lights.

The Philosopher Aristotle gave this advice about truth telling. We must tell the right truth, to the right person, at the right time, in the right way, for the right reason.

Not every truth is ours to tell. Truth told in confidence must be kept in confidence. Truth that will needlessly diminish another, hurt another, tarnish another, is not mine to tell.

Truth must be told at the right time, in the right way. You have no obligation to tell a father

that your son made Phi Beta Kappa the day his son dropped out of community college. You have no obligation to tell a man about your promotion the day he was fired. You may firmly believe that all things work together for good, but the time to tell your truth is not when a mother's child has been killed by a drunken driver.

So, before any words pass from your lips, let them pass this litmus test of love: Are they true? Are they kind? Are they Necessary? In your heart, give a truthful answer.

### **BE FLEXIBLE**

*Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.*

A Green Bay Packers fan, upset that his 7-year-old son would not wear a Packers' jersey during the team's playoff victory last Saturday, restrained the child to a chair for an hour and taped the jersey on him. Matthew Kowald was cited for disorderly conduct when his wife called police. — Sometimes we just need to lighten up.

A mother was enraged at the principal of a school in which her daughter, age 11, was about to enroll. She had just learned her daughter would have to wear a uniform to school. It was not the expense that upset the mother. It was the fact that her daughter would not be able to wear the fancy designer clothes she had purchased for her. The pain she felt was that of a mother whose daughter had been mugged on Main Street. — Sometimes we need to get things in perspective.

It will be a happier day in our families when we stop demanding perfection of those we love. You did not marry your idealized woman or man. You married a flawed human being. Your children are not angels and parents are not perfect.

We all have our quirks. We squeeze the toothpaste differently, have different tolerance levels of messiness around the house, and hold varied notions of a good time. We all make mistakes. We follow too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have left undone those things we ought to have done and we have done those things we ought not to have done. Seventy percent of the conflicts that were there at the start of your relationship will remain in place until the end. So, we must know the difference between conflicts which scratch the skin and those which scour the soul. We need to keep our expectations within reason.

### **BE FORGIVING**

*Bear with one another and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

Because there is so much confusion and guilt among church people about the art of forgiveness, let me begin by noting some things that forgiveness is not.

Forgiving is not **CONDONING**. Forgiveness is neither minimizing the wrong nor excusing the person who committed the act. "He really didn't mean to hit her, and after all, it's not that big a deal"—that is condoning. That is not forgiving. Russell was the victim of a hit and run accident. He forgave the driver as a way of healing his own emotional pain, but he still

pressed charges and pursued legal action. Forgiveness is not condoning.

Forgiving is not FORGETTING. Forgetting is a disease known as dementia or Alzheimer's. It is tragic and painful. Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember.

We build Holocaust Museums, not to wallow in the tragedies it brought, but to remind us never to tolerate such horrors again. Remembering helps us celebrate the process of forgiving. It reminds us of how far we have come since we first experienced the pain. Remembering empowers compassion and support for others.

Forgiving is not RECONCILING. It takes one person to forgive. It takes two persons to reconcile. You can forgive those with whom you desire no further relationship. Forgiveness is not going back. It's moving forward.

Forgiveness is A CONSCIOUS DECISION TO MOVE ON.

We forgive when we are ready to move toward a future unshackled from a painful past that we cannot undo.

Forgiveness begins with a "desire in the heart." We want something better for ourselves than we presently feel. Forgiveness is not a matter of ought; it is a matter of opportunity. My preaching can make you feel guilty or bitter but it won't make you any better. We forgive when we feel God's Spirit nudging us with an impulse to pull ourselves out of the sludge of our disabling resentment.

Forgiveness is AN EXPERIENCE OF GRACE.

*"Forgive as God has forgiven you."* If you have never allowed your own face to become greasy with the grace that God alone supplies, you are not likely to become a forgiving person. We forgive out of humility, not from arrogance. We forgive from neediness not from narcissism.

The examples of others encourage us. Jesus said on the Cross, *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."* As he was being stoned to death Stephen cried out *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."* Martin Luther King said, "If we are arrested every day, if we are exploited every day, if we are trampled over every day, don't ever let anyone pull you so low as to hate them. We must use the weapon of love."

Forgiveness is AN ACT OF SURRENDER.

"All to Jesus I surrender, all to him I freely give"— Do we really mean it when we sing it? Are we willing to let go of our hurts and pains, our disappointments and sorrows? Can we bring them to the Lord and leave them there? Revenge may taste sweet with the first bite, but it grows bitter with the second and third chew. You deserve to be free of malice, anger, and bitterness. The time to start is now.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.

