

Dealing with Differences (Pt. 1): Beyond Fear and Anger

Series: Making Relationships Work: Love, Sex & Marriage

October 1, 2017 – Brad Bailey

Today...we are **continuing** our **fall focus** on **Making Relationships Work: Love, Sex, and Marriage**. Began with God's declaration that it is not good for man to be alone...and then the significance of understanding what the purpose of marriage was and wasn't...and last week...the need to renew recognizing that not only were we created as male and female...but that we were created a complimentary counterparts to be a gift to one another.

Most of us experience something of that gift...but not without some conflict. We **want to connect** with others...but we **generally don't want the conflict**. The truth is that **to care for another person** is to **accept the cost of disagreement and disappointment**. The meaningful **connection we want... requires navigating conflict**.

So today...first of two weeks focused on **how to work through conflict in a positive way**.

Now each of us have **different feelings that arise** when the conflict is spoken of... Depending on our **past and personalities**... including our **culture and family background**... we may have very different feelings about conflict and anger and how it's expressed.

Imagine the Italian guy taking his Asian girlfriend to a family diner. From her cultural and family pattern voices are rarely raised to parents... and the family may quietly gather around the table with respect for the father in particular. She walks into his home and... everybody is shouting... with the intensity of a bar room about to break out into a full brawl... then mom shouts dinner and they all sit down as if nothing happened. The poor girlfriend is now shaking with fear while the rest are laughing it up. For her she just entered World War Three... for him... it's just a family dinner.

Consider for a moment: How was **conflict and anger expressed in your childhood household**? My family – conflict was safe but quite avoided...and my wife knows that affects my comfort of relating to conflict.

Families carry a lot of patterns that can be helpful...but also not so helpful. Our households shape how we relate to every aspect of life...including money...sex...and conflict.

And every family has been managing conflict ever since we began hiding from God.

In that poetic summary God provides in the beginning of the Scriptures...God includes most of the third chapter to capturing the beginning of conflict.

God describes how human life separated from God was uncovered... no longer shameless and secure... and they are depicted as hiding in their shame...and now deflecting in with blame. Separated from God...we have all been **operating with fundamental insecurity**... and from it we **blame and shame**. And that is the nature **still at work**. [1]

God offers some perspective.... that if we will understand...will help us.

When any two or more people work together as a team, there will be differences which can lead to conflict.

- different beliefs, opinions, and points of view leading to **disagreements**.
- different needs, desires, and expectations leading to **disappointments**.

SO the first thing that may be helpful is to...

1. Understand that conflict is a natural part of connecting with others who are different.

If we can accept we are different...we can accept that there is going to be some basic conflict.

Every relationship is always managing basic differences...and therefore some potential conflict.

Marriages in particular will find it helpful to recognize that lifelong relationships will develop two levels of relating and conversation... the daily 'functional' and the underlying 'relational'... each of which needs to be valued.

In the midst of our daily life there are many types of issues which we may need to resolve immediately in order just to fulfill what is at hand (meals, plans, purchases, etc.) We can refer to this as the **'functional' level**. It is what is involved with managing life's basic daily demands and practical needs. There will be conflicts involved... maybe even daily... but there is a practical reality in terms of the limits of time and energy that will only be able to resolve these conflicts at a functional level.

Meanwhile, there is a level below the surface where our underlying relationship is being developed and defined... and could be referred to as the **'relational' level**. Here lies what has been developing between us amidst all the functional living. It's the deeper answer to the question "How are we doing?" This level may be engaged reasonably often early on in the relationship and marriage.....but over time the dotted line that separates the upper functional and underlying relational can become more solid and steady. Careers and children simply leave little time and energy. We get settled into patterns of avoiding issues that we simply don't know how to resolve in a positive way. This is where the more underlying level of conflict waits too be given the time and attention to keep the relationship positive.

We need to appreciate both the functional and relational levels of connection. We need to be **patient and yet committed** to dealing with that **underlying level**. Demanding that every issue be resolved on any and all given days is just not realistic. We don't have the time and energy in the midst of busy lives to engage some of the underlying dynamics well. This is where we need to mutually choose and commit to some quality time... whether a weekly date night... or an

annual get away...or simply some form of extended time when needed. We need to keep the underlying conversation going.

2. Understand the limitations of changing another person.

Far more than we see...or at least initially recognize...we are **drawn to people** who are often **opposite of us...mirror image**... I suppose it is part of fitting together...uniting. But then... those **very differences become frustrating**...so we do what any normal person would do...we try to change them.

Naturally **once we realize** that **another person does not operate like we do**...we want to change them.

It **may take time**...but we will **help them understand their misguided ways**.

The truth of this endeavor is **not hard to assess**. Ask anyone who has been married for five years: ***How's that going for you?***

It never really works.

Here's what's helpful to realize...John Gottman.... In his ongoing 40+ years of research with over 3,000 couples ... about 70% of conflict will never really be resolved...because the differences are fundamental to who the two involved are. What changes is the nature of how they relate to those differences. [2]

We grow in dealing with conflict not by getting rid of our differences ...but by developing a more constructive and respectful way in which we understand and work with them.

One way is...

3. Understand there is a positive nature to differences that often we need.

It can transform the nature of conflict when differences that bring frustration can also be recognized as bringing needed balance and good.

God created differences which help create a better balanced whole. In the Bible, the Apostle Paul speaks at length about this. He is encouraging community life that understands that God created differences...and they are a part of what unites to help us.

1 Corinthians 12:4-6, 18-21

⁴ There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

¹⁸ ...in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"

If true in community...it's also true in marriage. We need some differences.

This can become a defining part of the marriage process. Nearly every marriage will have differences which will always be a challenge...always bring some disappointment. What helps married hearts is realizing that there may be an aspect of that difference which they actually were drawn to and still has a good side.

- My wife and I are very different in making decisions. I am a high processor...like to be very thoughtful. I am always thinking about what is really the right decisions...the best choice...and she is like, "Honey...it's just paper towels we're choosing." She is practical...and quick at making decisions...and our family would never eat or function without her more practical perspective. And we can both appreciate that while this difference can be a frustration... each of us can serve different decision making best.

This can be true for two of the most common areas of conflict in a marriage relationship.

- Money – Usually one person tends to be high on responsibility... and more planning minded...budget minded...they bring security and serve long term goals... and the other is more a free spirit...and they bring freedom from assuming too much control... and fear.
- Sex – One brings more physical desire for physical intimacy...and one brings more relational connection to that intimacy.

But even when we learn to appreciate our differences...we will also have disagreements and disappointments that become hurtful. Sometimes hurt comes...anger arises.

It's helpful to know that we all may experience conflict and anger... but we manage it in different ways.

We typically tend toward one of two extremes – Clam up or Blow up / Turtle or Skunk

Some people **clam up** when they get angry and other people **blow up** when they get angry. Some people stuff it all inside and others let it all out. There's the difference between **the mute**, keep it quiet, and **the maniac**, let it all out. It's the difference between **a turtle or a skunk**. When you get into conflict, if you're a turtle, you pull your neck back in and you hide in your shell. On the other hand if you're a skunk you just spew all over and you let everybody know it.

What's even more interesting is that skunks nearly always marry turtles and turtles nearly always marry skunks. Some have suggested that it's just God's sense of humor that he puts opposites together. He says watch this, we're going to put them together. Why it happens may remain a mystery.... but it happens.

What's also vital to recognize is that both tendencies can reflect a problem with anger. We all have problems with anger and that it will challenge our relationships and our success in life.

Anger is a force... that like the forces of nature... is not simply good or bad... but must be managed. And few of us have learned how to manage it well.

Ephesians 4:26-27 (TEV)

“If you become angry, do not let your anger lead you into sin... and do not stay angry ... Don't give the Devil a chance.”

Notice that the **feeling itself is not referred to as a sin**. It is what we do with it. In essence he is saying when you feel anger you need to **take responsibility for what you say and do**.

Anger is not a choice. That is why we are not told not to be angry. We are told to be slow to become angry... to guard our disposition... and to be responsible with what we do with our anger. **The feeling of anger is not our choice... but what we do with it is.** [3]

We need to understand that...

4. Understand that anger is not inherently a sin nor a savior... it's a symptom.

*If we are going to work with anger it's important that we understand something about **what it is and it isn't**.*

Some people feel that **anger is a sin**... something they should feel **ashamed** or be **afraid** of.
> That will lead us to **suppress** our feelings...and **avoid other people's feeling**...and when we do... **we don't develop real connection**.

Some people may consider anger to be a **saving power**. We are encouraged not only to get in touch with anger...but we think it is an end in itself. It's not.

The Bible is very clear and consistent regarding anger... particularly our anger as human beings. It never refers to the feelings of anger as a sin. But it consistently refers to what can come from anger as a sin... which is contempt, slander, and the destruction of ourselves and others.

Anger is a symptom. *It's like discovering you have a fever. Is the fever bad? No. It is certainly a negative reaction... but a needed one because something is wrong. There is some sort of disease within you. Or if there is a **patch of red on your forearm**... do you know what is causing it? No. It's an irritation... but it could be caused by an infection... or a reaction to food or medicine... or an insect bite... or a lotion or chemical on your skin. The point is that it is a symptom that **something has gotten under your skin**.*

It's not inherently a sin or a savior... it's a symptom.

This is why anger is also referred to as a **secondary emotion**. It is the **reaction to something more primary**.

Every time we get angry it is a response to one of two underlying causes.

1) HURT

When we feel our personal value is neglected or attacked. *(I didn't get the promotion. I got criticized. I didn't get invited. I've been left waiting for someone who is always late.)*
Triggering insecurity.

Anger and insecurity always go together. The more insecure we are in life the more prone to anger we are going to be in life. **'If I can't get your approval, I will get your attention.'**

2) FRUSTRATION

When something or someone is creating a problem in reaching a goal... and causing a lost sense of control.

Frustration is when you get irritated and you're thwarted toward a goal. When you're forced to wait. Like you have to wait for something in a traffic jam and you don't want to wait. Or maybe nothing is working and you're trying to make something happen.

Frustration is caused **when you feel out of control.** *Whenever you feel out of control you tend to get angry. In fact, the more out of control you feel the more angry you're going to be. **People who have a high need for control to feel comfortable... will tend to struggle with a lot of anger.***

Understanding anger as a symptom of hurt and frustration can help those who tend to fear anger...and those who tend to freely express anger.

Those who fear anger... and tend to withdraw...can realize that there is a more primary feeling underneath hurt that can be explored,

For those who tend to be skunks... often feel consumed with anger...it is important to know that **anger can be SEDUCTIVE ... because it provides a feeling of control and power...while actually becoming a source of a loss of control and power.**

When we feel the primary effects of hurt, frustration, and fear... anger can be a very natural defense. Anger provides a sense of regaining POWER and CONTROL .. the very thing that we feel a loss of. When we feel angry.. it gives us a sense of strength... power... control. It is **defending us from the weakness we feel.** That is why it **becomes so tempting** to stay in the mode of anger. We don't want to tell someone that they HURT us... because that means becoming vulnerable... that they have that power over us.

This is why anger may be natural... but become dysfunctional relationally. We are **tempted to stay in the place and posture of anger to avoid the weakness.** We hold onto it rather than enter the risk involved with sharing our hurt... with exploring the relational pattern... with seeking to forgive and reconcile. We must understand that anger is dead set against such a process. It may serve as a natural and even healthy initial reaction... but we must understand that it will seduce us to believing it has given us something it can't.

When we maintain the protective covering of anger...**it will sabotage the very connection and care we long for.** [4]

Here is what is so helpful to consider: Which is more helpful to actually connecting with another person... expressing the secondary emotion of anger...or the primary emotion of feeling hurt?

If someone comes to me...perhaps feeling angry...but is able to express feeling hurt by something... it's an invitation to care. If all one expresses is anger... it's generally going to lead to withdrawal or anger in return.

Some will withdraw from anger... thinking...“If I just disengage...and avoid the other person...the dangerous feelings will go away.”

Perhaps if only in relationship to a shallow momentary issue...but generally when there is significant feelings that have developed...avoidance may bring temporary safety...but those feelings will only deepen.

> So those who **feel anger**...and those who **fear anger** will both be served by understanding it is a symptom...and **try to focus on the underlying hurt**...or frustration.

One final point that can be helpful... when we feel consumed by the hurt... violated... unfair...

5. Understand that the most essential need in maintaining perspective is HUMILITY.

Anger can draw us into self-righteousness... whether we are more like turtles or skunks.

The simple truth is that none of us are in a position to demand perfection and refuse to forgive.

- If we insist on the harm of others... we condemn our own hearts.
- As Jesus said...“If we live by the sword, we will die by the sword.”

This is what Jesus described in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt.18: 15-20).

He tells of a servant who owed their master more than they could pay in a lifetime. Indebted beyond any means to be free...they plead to their master for mercy. The master forgives them the entire debt. And now free...they begin returning home and run into a fellow servant who owes them just a days wage. The fellow servant pleads for mercy ...and the servant who had just received such profound mercy...refuses mercy to another.

Jesus is telling us about how self-righteous we can become... and how we must never lose our humility...and the place of mercy. **The ultimate antidote for anger is mercy.... which comes through humility regarding our own nature.** [5]

We all ultimately stand before a cross...God's own mercy...in which God forgave us by bearing our sin...shame...separation. [6]

Let's pray.

Resources: The message drew upon principles I developed for our Pre-Marriage Class. The references to how we tend to be turtles and skunks...and marry the opposite is drawn from Rick Warren (message on Love and Anger which is part of a series entitled *40 Days of Love*).

Notes:

1. We read in Genesis....

“Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. ⁸ Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid

from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.” Genesis 3:7-8 (NIV)

As described by “Foundation Five: Conflict Resolution In Marriage” -

<https://bible.org/seriespage/5-foundation-five-conflict-resolution-marriage>

After Adam sinned in the Garden, conflict ensued. When God asked him if he had eaten of the forbidden tree, he did not simply say, “Yes.” He said, “The woman you gave me, gave me the fruit and I did eat.” He indirectly blamed God and directly blamed the woman. The woman then blamed the serpent. When sin entered the world, so did conflict. In fact, God said that one of the results of sin would be conflict between the man and the woman. The wife would desire to control the husband and the husband would try to dominate the woman by force ([Gen 3:16](#)).

As we go throughout the biblical narrative, we continually see the fruit of sin displayed in conflict. In [Genesis 4](#), Cain killed his brother Abel. In the same chapter, Cain’s son, Lamech, killed another man and boasted about it. In [Genesis 6](#), the world was full of “violence,” and God decided to wipe out its inhabitants through the flood. However, the flood didn’t change the nature of man, and therefore, conflict has continued throughout history. The world has known no time without war or conflict, and unfortunately, marriages are not exempt.

Paul taught that one of the fruits of the flesh, our sin nature, is “discord” ([Gal 5:20](#)). We are prone to offend others, to be offended, to hate, to withhold forgiveness, and to divide. Sadly, all these fruits are prone to blossom within the marriage union. Couples should be aware of this, and therefore, prepare to resolve conflict in marriage. How should couples resolve conflict in marriage?

2. Dr. Gottman found that unresolvable "perpetual" problems exist in even the healthiest of relationships due to "lasting personality differences between partners" (Gottman, "The Science of Trust"). Their research suggests that **most conflict (69%) is never fully resolved** ... but rather it is the effect it has that can change.

3. Other Scriptures regarding anger:

Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly. – Proverbs 14:29

Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, “I will take revenge; I will pay them back,” says the Lord. – Romans 12:19

4. The Scripture’s warn us of the cost of what anger can bring.

“The fool who provokes his family to anger and resentment will finally have nothing worthwhile left.” Proverbs 11:29 (LB)

When anger dominates our posture in relationships... it will lead to three things: more anger, apathy, alienation. If someone constantly relates with anger... these three things are likely to unfold over time.

5. Regarding humility...and realizing how we have been shown mercy by God...
Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. – Colossians 3:13
This is what Jesus described in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt.18: 15-20).

6. Ultimately we must hear the need to guard our hearts.
"...guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." Proverbs 4:23
All of us can develop hardened hearts... hopeless hearts.... bitter hearts.This can happen in any relationship...it is most tragic in the marriage

We also hear of the issue of the heart when we read, "Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce ... because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning." Matthew 19:8. The **religious leaders** had developed a pattern of **justifying** their dismissal of spouses...because they had become self-righteously distorted. So can we.
God knows that the heart of the problem is a problem in the heart. He declares...
"I'll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you. I'll remove the stone heart from your body and replace it with a heart that's God-willed, not self-willed." - Ezekiel 36:26 (Msg)

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2. Understand the limitations of _____ another person.

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Every time we get angry it is a response to one of two underlying causes. 1) _____ 2) _____

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5. Understand that the most essential need in maintaining perspective is _____.

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