

Becoming a Peacemaker Series

Unhealthy Responses to Conflict (Eph. 4:26-27)

By
Andy Davis

At A Glance:

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These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.

Unhealthy Responses to Conflict

I. Introduction

A. Illustration: Peace Denied

Brian Noble, in his book *The Path of a Peacemaker: Your Biblical Guide to Healthy Relationships, Conflict Resolution, and a Life of Peace* shares the following story:

During the greeting time at church, I was shaking a man's hand when I discerned something was not right between the two of us. Sure enough, as soon as I let go of his hand, he stormed out of the service. I was not preaching that day, so I went looking for him in the building. I found him sitting in our café.

"Do we need to talk?" I asked.

"Sure."

We went to my office, where he unloaded a story about how we had not been there to help him in a time of need.

"We were being evicted, and you and the church didn't care," he said.

I listened. "I'm sorry," I said. "I truly am. Do you mind if I share a different perspective?"

"Sure," he said. "Share it with me."

I told him the church *did* know of his need and wanted to help, but we needed a definitive dollar amount of his need. "We couldn't just give cash," I said.

At that, he shifted the focus of his hurt a bit. "Well, no one helped my family move. I put it on a prayer request card, and no one followed up."

"Again, I'm sorry," I said. "I was unaware of this."

He got mad and stormed out.¹

- B. When we pay careful attention to this interaction, we can see several unhealthy responses to conflict. While disciples are to attempt to live in peace with others, the reality is, in some cases this will not be possible with those who choose to respond in unhealthy ways. The observations are not intended to criticize the man in this story, but to be instructional. It is easy to act inappropriately when we are mad—everyone does.
- C. This man didn't take the initiative to resolve the conflict, even though he was the only one who knew something was wrong. He made accusations about the attitudes and heart of the church that were incorrect. He assumed just because he wanted something from others, he was entitled to receive it. Others were obligated to provide what he thought he deserved. Finally, he stormed out mad, even after a second apology. Months later, the man did apologize for blowing up.
- D. Unhealthy responses to conflict are natural and commonplace. Healthy responses to conflict are learned and intentionally chosen. It takes work to become a peacemaker who responds to conflict in healthy ways. We need to understand, "the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (Jas. 1:20). When we are angry, odds are, we're not acting the way God desires us to act. We need to learn how to be angry and not do wrong at the same time (Ps. 4:4, Eph. 4:26). This takes thoughtfulness and care. The truth is, peacemaking doesn't come

¹ P. Brian Noble, [*The Path of a Peacemaker: Your Biblical Guide to Healthy Relationships, Conflict Resolution, and a Life of Peace*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019).

naturally to us, and we must learn how to do it. We'll continue this learning process by identifying unhealthy responses to conflict.

II. Escape Responses

- A. We are looking at how we, as disciples, can learn to be peacemakers. Being a peacemaker is part of the identity of those who belong to Jesus and who live in His kingdom in this world (Mt. 5:9). Those who work for and act in ways consistent with making peace are happy and are called the children of God. God reconciles and makes peace, and so does everyone who is connected to Him. While peacemaking is a skill to be learned, it is part of the identity we have as individuals who have a healthy relationship with Jesus. The Holy Spirit shapes us into the type of person who can reconcile, restore, and create peace with others.
- B. As Jesus taught us in the last message, much of the most important elements related to conflict are what is going on in our hearts. How a person thinks, what their priorities and desires are, and how they assume life works impacts how they act. These are the ultimate sources of conflict. When Jesus dealt with conflict with His disciples, He didn't deal directly with the presenting issue, but with the hearts and attitudes of the disciples. Dealing with our internal world is how conflict resolution happens.
- C. It can be very helpful to identify unhealthy ways of responding to conflict so that we can strive to avoid these unhelpful responses. If we are left to ourselves, without God's wisdom or influence, we will naturally respond to conflict in unhealthy ways. Human nature left to its own devices will make conflict worse, not better. Knowing this helps us understand our need for God's assistance in becoming the person we need to be so that peacemaking becomes a real possibility. While living in peace with others is not always possible, hopefully, it can be achieved in many cases. Peace should always be possible between disciples—people who are connected to Jesus in a healthy way and are actively pursuing obedience to Him. As long as both parties are obedient to Jesus, peace is not just a possibility, but the expected result.
- D. Ken Sande, a former engineer and lawyer, founded and worked with Peacemaker Ministries for thirty years before moving on to start another organization focused on preventing conflict rather than resolving conflict through Relational Wisdom. Ken has been working in the area of conflict for as long as I've been alive. He's written several books, including his most popular one, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*. In all this work, Ken developed a tool that helps people understand healthy versus unhealthy responses to conflict called The Slippery Slope. We will use this tool to explain the most common unhealthy responses to conflict in the hope that we can learn to avoid these types of responses. I was trained on the older version of this tool for my Peacemaking Level 1 training.



- E. One category of unhealthy responses is called the Escape Responses. These types of responses attempt to avoid conflict, usually because conflict is uncomfortable and possibly dangerous—in that relationships could be damaged or there could be negative responses. Some escape responses are more serious than others.
- F. The first escape type response is denial. Denial ignores conflict and refuses to get involved with trying to resolve it. While denial can be to willfully deny the existence of conflict, it can go much farther. Denying the existence of the conflict can sound like, “I’m not mad,” “That didn’t bother me,” or “I’ll get over it.” Another form of denial is when conflict is known to exist but it is ignored and not dealt with. Sometimes the excuse of not wanting to make the situation worse is used. In denial, a person may refuse to talk to another person or do anything to participate in the process of trying to work through an issue. Perhaps requests for conversation are avoided and rejected. The silent treatment is a form of denial.
- G. Escape responses can be seen when David avoided Absalom after he killed Amnon, David’s son from another wife (2 Sam. 3:2, 1 Sam. 25:43), in revenge for the rape of his sister Tamar.² While David was an excellent military and political leader, he struggled to address conflict within his family on multiple occasions. Here is what happened with Absalom after Absalom killed Amnon:
- ³⁷ Now Absalom had fled and gone to Talmai the son of Ammihud, the king of Geshur. And *David* mourned for his son every day. ³⁸ So Absalom had fled and gone to Geshur, and was there for three years. ³⁹ And *the heart of King David* longed to go out to Absalom; for he was comforted regarding Amnon, since he was dead.
(2 Sam. 13:37-39)

² This conflict had been ongoing for seven years (2 Sam. 13:20-23, 13:38, 14:28). While this killing could have been considered murder, according to the law, rape was a capital offense and the closest family member, called the avenger of blood, could be the person to put the offending party to death (Dt. 22:23-27, Dt. 19:6, 19:12-13, Josh. 20:9). This very issue was brought up to David in this case (2 Sam. 14:11). There is a difference of opinion as to whether the killing of Amnon was wrong or not.

- H. David did not try to resolve the conflict or be reconciled with Absalom for three years, even though his heart longed to be restored to Absalom after the grief of losing his other son had passed. It wasn't until the initiative of Joab that convinced David to allow Absalom back to the city where David was living that David did anything to address the situation:

²³ So Joab arose and went to Geshur, and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. ²⁴ However, the king said, "He shall return to his own house, but he shall not see my face." So Absalom returned to his own house and did not see the king's face. (2 Sam. 14:23-24)

- I. Once back in Jerusalem, David still didn't try to get his relationship with Absalom restored after another two years:

²⁸ Now Absalom lived two full years in Jerusalem, yet he did not see the king's face. (2 Sam 14:28)

- J. If such a godly man as David can avoid conflict for five years, how much easier will it be for us to make denial our response to conflict? Denial may be the most common response to conflict, and it is unhealthy. For David, it led to Absalom stealing the kingdom from him and a civil war. While "avoiding" conflict, denial usually results in growing anger, resentment, bitterness and a worsening of relationships. Since the conflict isn't being dealt with in a healthy way, frequently people will gossip and slander to others about the person they have a problem with instead of going to the person with whom they are in conflict to get the issue resolved. Denial doesn't avoid conflict; it makes the conflict worse by responding poorly to the conflict.
- K. The first escape response is denial and the second is flight. If conflict gets significant enough, people leave the situation and the relationship that is causing the conflict. This is when people change jobs, leave churches, break off a romantic relationship, or look for new friends. All these types of responses are flight responses to conflict while avoiding having to try to resolve the conflict. Absalom fled to another city under different leadership ("Now Absalom had fled and gone to", 2 Sam. 13:37). It needs to be noted that flight, in certain situations, can be a healthy response, such as persecution or other situations in which a person's personal safety is at risk. However, in most cases, flight shouldn't be the course taken until steps have been attempted to resolve the conflict and reconcile to the other person. Refusing to talk and then running away is not a healthy response to conflict.
- L. The inappropriate flight response can be seen in how Hagar responded to the mistreatment she received from Sarai (Abraham's wife):

⁶ But Abram said to Sarai, "Look, your slave woman is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight." So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence. ⁷ Now the angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸ He said, "Hagar, Sarai's slave woman, from where have you come, and where are you going?" And she said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai." ⁹ So the angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her authority." ¹⁰ The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count." ¹¹ The angel of the Lord said to her further, "Behold, you are pregnant, And you will give birth to a son;

And you shall name him Ishmael, Because the Lord has heard your affliction.”

(Gen. 16:6-11)

- M. Hagar was being mistreated by the person who had authority over her—Abram’s (later called Abraham) wife Sarai (later called Sarah). The situation got so bad that Hagar decided to run away (“Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence”, v. 6). While this response is understandable, it wasn’t the right course of action. God appeared to Hagar and instructed her to go back and promised that He would take care of her and her child (“Return to your mistress and submit to her authority”, v. 9). While the situation was unpleasant, Hagar was not in physical danger. God told Hagar to go back to an unpleasant and difficult situation, but He also cared for her knowing, how much she was suffering (“the Lord has heard your affliction”, v. 11). While our natural life purpose is to avoid as much difficulty and pain as we can, God’s purposes for us are different, and He sometimes requires us to stay in uncomfortable situations.
- N. The most serious escape response is suicide. When people lose all hope of resolving conflict and can’t see any way out of their misery in this world, they try to leave this world.³ When the seriousness of the consequences of his actions caught up with him, this was the response Judas took:
- ³ Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders,⁴ saying, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” But they said, “What *is that* to us? You shall see *to it* yourself!”⁵ And he threw the pieces of silver into the temple sanctuary and left; and he went away and hanged himself. (Mt. 27:3-5)
- O. When a person feels powerless to change their situation or resolve conflict in a way they desire (or need), the only way to get rid of the conflict is to end their life. Unfortunately, this response has been growing.⁴ With so many people struggling in life, mental health in decline, and a lacking sense of hope for the future, the tragedy of suicide is becoming all too familiar. Jesus came to give people life and hope as they handle life His way. Judas didn’t see any way out of what he’d done, so he ended his own life (“he went away and hanged himself”, v. 5). Self-murder (suicide) is just as wrong as murdering another person. While the moral gravity is slightly different, the act is just as wrong. Those who think their life is their own and they can do what they want with it are mistaken. All lives belong to God, and only He decides when our lives are over (Lk. 12:20, Ezek. 18:4, Job 27:8, Eccl. 5:18, Dan. 5:23). This is not said to guilt or condemn anyone who may have contemplated taking their own life; the intent here is to protect, preserve, and save life! The false assumption that our lives belong to us so we can do with them as we please is very dangerous and destructive.
- P. All forms of escape response are self-focused.⁵ These unhealthy responses attempt to make our lives easier and more comfortable with the least amount of work. We don’t want to feel uncomfortable, so we ignore and avoid conflict. Working on the relationship and getting the

³ Unfortunately, thinking that leaving this world will end their suffering is not true for too many people.

⁴ Suicide rates increased 37 percent between 2000-2018 and peaked in 2022 after a previous decline. The suicide rate among males in 2023 was four times higher than among females. People age eighty-five and older had the highest rate of suicide in 2023. [Suicide Data and Statistics | Suicide Prevention | CDC www.cdc.gov/suicide/facts/data.html](https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/facts/data.html)

⁵ Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson, [Resolving Everyday Conflict](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 39.

issue resolved requires time and effort, so we skip over it. In most cases, escape responses ignore the other person and their interests because it's easier to focus only on what we want and how the conflict is affecting us. If the other person will not give us what we want, we simply ignore and dismiss them.

- Q. Have you recognized any of these unhealthy conflict responses in you? If so, which ones? What do you need to do to change these unhealthy responses to healthy ones? While it can be good to “overlook an offense” (Pr. 19:11, 17:9, 10:2, 1 Pet. 4:8), if this causes us to never deal with conflict, this good response is being used in unhealthy ways. Offenses should only be overlooked when we are capable of genuinely letting go of them so they don't continue to affect us or our relationships. If an offense bothers us, we must deal with it instead of denying it.
- R. Think about times when you have conflict with your spouse. What do you do? How do you act? Think about when you have conflict at work with a coworker or someone under your authority—this reveals far more about how we handle conflict than when we are at odds with those who have authority over us. Do you notice any patterns in your responses to conflict in different areas of life?
- S. Disciples need to live their lives with courage—courage to enter and navigate difficult situations and conversations. Developing a God-centered character requires us to move beyond an easy life full of comfort and ease. If God is going to shape us to be like Jesus, we need to imitate His way of life, including the more uncomfortable elements. As disciples, we need to be able to identify and fight against our own natural tendencies when we recognize we are reacting to conflict with denial, flight, or start thinking about suicide. Comfort shouldn't be our greatest priority; becoming like Jesus should. Disciples should embrace and initiate the process of dealing with conflict the way Jesus did.

III. Attack Responses

- A. While some people attempt to avoid conflict, others try to embrace conflict in a way that they think will get them what they want. Conflict isn't avoided; it is used to achieve their desired purposes. These types of responses are called Attack Responses. Instead of leaning away from conflict, it is leaned into. The relationship and the welfare of other people is not as important as winning to those who use attack responses. Escape responses are passive while attack responses are active.
- B. The first attack response is assault. Assault doesn't have to be physical violence; it can be as simple as raising one's voice, interrupting, lecturing, or nagging. Assault happens when people try to overcome an opponent by using various forms of force, intimidation, or manipulation such as verbal attacks, physical intimidation or violence, or efforts to damage a person financially or professionally. Whatever power a person thinks they can use to get what they want, they will use it to gain victory over whatever or whoever stands in their way. A common element in assault is the use of demands or ultimatums when one person tries to force another person to do what they want. Demands can be made, even without any way to enforce those requirements. Assault responses attempt to weaken the other side to gain the upper hand.

Name calling, insults, criticism, talking down with condescension, fault-finding, and other similar behaviors are all attack responses.

- C. Several examples of attack responses can be seen in the way Stephen was treated by the men from the Synagogue of the Freedman:
- ⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, *including* both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they were unable to cope with his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” ¹² And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away, and brought him before the Council. ¹³ They put forward false witnesses who said, “This man does not stop speaking against this holy place and the Law; ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses handed down to us.” (Acts 6:8-14)
- D. Eventually, Stephen was murdered so these men could get what they wanted (Ac. 7:57-59)—removing the perceived “threat” to their authority. The attack responses started verbally when they went after Stephen (“rose up and argued with Stephen”, v. 9). The attack response began with trying to win the argument verbally. When the men of the synagogue were unsuccessful in their verbal attack response (“they were unable to cope with his wisdom and the Spirit”, v. 10), they tried a stronger approach by making false accusations (“they secretly induced men to say...”, v. 11). Plotting, planning, and strategizing behind closed doors was the next strategy. They recruited more people to help them by creating a larger group of people on their side. The morality of their actions wasn’t the primary concern; winning by defeating Stephen was the most important consideration. Anything that would help the men achieve this end was used. Lying to defeat the other side is allowed (“We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God”, v. 11). Instead of calming the conflict down, these men did the opposite to win (“they stirred up the people”, v. 12). These attack responses are not focused on peace; they are looking for victory.
- E. Another attack response is blame. Blame places the fault and responsibility for the problems or conflict onto another person instead of ourselves. Blame is a way to dismiss or ignore our responsibility in the conflict and to protect ourselves by thinking all the responsibility is with someone else. The reality, however, is that in most conflicts, both parties share the responsibility for the problem to varying degrees. The men in the synagogue blamed Stephen for creating the problem (“This man does not stop speaking against this holy place and the Law”, v. 13). Stephen is accused and viewed as the person who is creating the issue. This blame response is found in the newer versions of the Slippery Slope tool that focuses more specifically on the more common reactions to conflict rather than including the more extreme responses.



- F. Litigation is another way to force people to bend to our will as an attack response, as the men of the synagogue did to Stephen. Trying to use an outside authority to get what we want is commonplace, especially using the legal system. The men of the synagogue used legal force to gain victory over Stephen (“brought him before the Council”, v. 12). Jesus wisely warned against using this method of conflict resolution even on the defendant side (Mt. 5:25-26). Litigation-type responses start early in life when a child says to their parent, “Dad, tell my brother to...”. When an individual fails to have the power necessary to make another person do what they want, they attempt to use a power greater than themselves to do it for them. Authority structures are used as a tool to get what one wants. While sometimes using the law is necessary when the other side refuses to do what is morally right, litigation is usually not a healthy response to conflict. It is better to be wronged than to do wrong to others (1 Cor. 6:7-8). Litigation can also happen when people try to gain others to their side to win in the court of public opinion with friends, colleagues, or even strangers on the internet.
- G. The most serious attack response is murder. Finally, they used the legal system to murder Stephen—in the same way Jesus was murdered (“they began stoning him...They went on stoning Stephen...he fell asleep”, Ac. 7:58-60). When all else fails, physical violence against another person is used to get what is desired. Abuse can be put into this attack response. The most extreme form of physical violence is murder. Those who are selfishly set on getting their own way use physical force to get what they want in conflict when all other attack strategies fail. Murder is never a valid option for those who belong to God (1 Jn. 3:15).⁶
- H. As Ken Sande has rightly observed, some people immediately turn to attack responses as soon as they are in conflict. Others take time to move to attack responses, only after all other conflict

⁶ While this is a difficult passage to understand and apply regarding the attitude of hate, the main point being made is that murder is incompatible with a person having eternal life. No one can murder another person while they are in right relationship with God. This doesn't mean a murderer can't be saved following their crime, it only means a true spiritual child of Jesus will not commit murder.

resolution strategies did not work.⁷ No matter how quickly or what path a person takes to get to attack type responses, these responses are never healthy and only make the conflict worse, even if the person using them happens to “win”. It is much easier for people to use attack responses when they don’t think they have anything valuable to lose. When people don’t value other people or the relationship with whom we are in conflict, we tend to use attack strategies. However, when we understand that there is a cost to using attack responses (such as in a marriage, for example), the less likely people are to use these types of conflict strategies. If people think they will need to face and deal with the relational consequences, attack strategies are usually taken off the table. This is why most people will not punch their boss—we care about the cost we would have to pay to do so.

- I. Have you ever tried to use some form of force, intimidation, or manipulation to make someone else do what you want? How did that attack response play out? Even if you got what you wanted, what was the negative impact of using that response to conflict? What cost had to be paid?
- J. Those who go into attack mode during conflict do so because they are trying to create certain results. Working toward creating results isn’t bad, but it can become a problem when we try to force the results we want. Our job is to do what is right, that which is pleasing to God in all circumstances, and then trust God with the results. God is the One who ultimately determines the outcomes of our lives, and disciples need to trust God and His plan, even when the results aren’t the ones we want. Those who confidently trust God will be more ready to accept situational outcomes that are outside their control.
- K. Throughout the rest of this series, we are going to be covering how to replace these unhealthy conflict responses with healthy ones so we can learn to become peacemakers. We will become familiar with the perspectives, character, and the skills that lead to better responses to conflict. Since this personal transformation is so challenging, we need to learn how to depend on the power of Jesus to become a peacemaker. We can’t learn to navigate conflict well without His help.

IV. Conclusion

- A. When we don’t handle conflict in healthy ways, either through avoiding or attacking, we can’t work toward peacemaking in a way that is glorifying to God. Disciples need to learn to change their unhealthy responses to conflict to healthy ones. This will involve developing new perspectives and habits. Our goal in all this is to avoid sin, even when we’re angry (Eph. 4:26).
- B. Those who are attached to Jesus are called by God to live in peace with others, especially within the church:

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ, to which you were indeed called in one body, rule in your hearts; and be thankful. (Col. 3:15)

⁷ Ken Sande, [*The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*](#), Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 25.