

Working it Out: Communication (Conflict Resolution)

Ephesians 4:25-32 & Various Proverbs

Introduction

Two weeks ago we discussed the importance of good communication and how that includes our need to listen and recognize the role of body language. We likewise discussed venting and counsel, and how our communication takes a range of everyday tones as well as needing to take time to explore deeper and more difficult issues.

Good communication provides the greatest tool in our ability to navigate through life's challenges. This communication is of course seen first and most importantly in our relationship with the Lord through having regular time of communion with Him. In a similar way, we also need to maintain good communication with our spouse both in frequency as well as in quality.

Last week we discussed some of the major areas that can generate or contribute to conflicts in a marriage including the areas of physical intimacy and finances. We learned how important communication is in regards to health in these areas but these areas as well as poor communication can lead to major conflict.

In order to navigate conflict towards health, growth, healing and reconciliation in marriage we must learn how to communicate well. God gives us a beautiful example of this through the Gospel. Our relationship with God was broken through sin, and God initiated the process of reconciliation through communicating the gospel to us. In other words in our conflict and brokenness God communicated His love for us through the cross and His resurrection. Our belief in this and confession navigates us towards health, growth, healing and reconciliation. Now our ability to reconcile with God depends on our acceptance of that gospel message. Keep this in mind as we talk about conflict resolution.

Conflict Resolution

In conflict resolution, it is helpful to recognize that there are often different kinds of conflict. One we could call the *flare up*, and the other we might call the *on-going conflict*. Sometimes the two can be intertwined and difficult to untangle. It is important to try to distinguish what type of conflict it is to help you discern what to

pursue in a conversation. It is often challenging to discuss all the issues causing conflict at once though it is very common for couples to do this especially when there is frustration, hurt, misunderstanding and confusion. In the flare up someone or both people are usually caught off guard and thrust into dealing with the conflict at hand.

Without good communication skills these moments are really hard to navigate. These are the moments that we tend to respond in attack and defend mode. We are probably all too familiar with saying something in the heat of the moment that we regret because we were in our flesh and acting defensively instead of lovingly. In today's lesson we are going to share some tools to help in these moments.

The on-going conflict usually stems from a deeper issue and has a history and pattern of behavior that may not be easily changed. Sometimes part of the issue is that the issues have been completely avoided and swept under the carpet. This can make addressing this kind of conflict more difficult, but the one thing you have that is different than a flare up is time. You can prayerfully consider the timing of addressing this kind of conflict, and also do more to prepare yourself and your spouse for the conversation. We will also talk about some helpful tools to help in navigating these conversations.

There are four principles and ten tools we'd like to share with you. Though you will find several of the tools in the principles we look at, we'll start with two extremely helpful tools, discuss the 4 principles and then look at the rest of the tools.

The number 1 tool we have is **prayer (Tool #1)**

- For the *flare up* this might look like a quick 'breath prayer,' asking God to help you temper your words, or give you wisdom in your response or to have the grace to apologize quickly for something you said or did poorly rather than to dig in your heels and persist in your pride (be careful to not whisper this out of frustration but consider praying to yourself) You may find that instead of reacting to your spouse you could ask to stop and pray and seek the Lord together.
- For the *on-going conflict*, first, be intentional to bring the issue to the Lord regularly. Consistently seek the Lord about how to address the issue at hand in a loving, honest and yet humble way. Next, agree with your spouse to begin these important conversations with prayer. Ask God together to give you wisdom and humility and grace as you discuss the issues.

The second tool is to “**check the 3 basic needs**” (Tool #2)

- If you are sensing a flare up, or are planning to engage in a conversation that may require more of you than you feel you are able to give at that moment Take a quick assessment of the ‘**basic needs**’ Assess yourself (or your spouse) and ask,
 1. Is anyone hungry?
 2. Does someone need to use the bathroom?
 3. Is someone tired, exhausted or sleep deprived?
- It is helpful to make sure that these basic needs are met before engaging in an emotionally draining conversation.

Learning how to navigate conflict well comes down to learning how to communicate well. So we are going to look at 4 principles of communication based off of Ephesians 4:25-32. (These came from Pastor Stephen who had them passed down from his father.) In short, these principles are:

1. Speak the Truth in Love
2. Stay Current
3. Attack the Problem not the Person
4. Act, don't React

Principle #1 - Speak The Truth In Love: Eph 4:25 – “Therefore, putting away lying, *“Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,”* for we are members of one another.”

First off, it is helpful to know that conflict resolution is a learned skill. Some people may be more naturally gifted in a way that helps them, and others may struggle to a greater degree than others. But ALL of us are called by God to be peacemakers (Matt 5:9) and to live at peace with one another (Rom 12:18). As God desires you to live at peace with Him, so He also desires for us to live at peace with one another.

This means that we are not to just ignore problems or sweep them under the rug in hopes that they will go away on their own or give the silent treatment. However, there is wisdom in both how and when we seek to confront an issue.

Ephesians 4:25 exhorts us to speak the truth to one another (Prov 12:22, 19:5). However, being honest is more than not lying. We practice all kinds of dishonesty in other ways, such as deceit, exaggeration, evasion, disguise, innuendo, half-truths, etc.

A common pitfall that we fall into in times of conflict is saying things like, “You always,” and “I never”. These statements are rarely true and usually reflect our “feelings” rather than truth. Thus when we speak in these exaggerated forms we are actually lying and not speaking the truth.

Furthermore, earlier in Ephesians 4 we see the command to “speak the truth in love” (vs 15). Sometimes we may be speaking the truth in an unloving way. Just as we would say that words matter, so does tone. We must be careful not to let our tone of voice and emotions take over, if you are seeking to have a productive conversation and to have your communication received correctly, high emotion and/or tones of sarcasm will not be helpful. **(Tool #3)**

We find much wisdom in the Proverbs about both our words and our tone. For example:

Prov. 10:19 In the multitude of words sin is not lacking,
But he who restrains his lips *is* wise.

Prov. 13:3 He who guards his mouth preserves his life,
But he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction.

Prov. 15:1 A soft answer turns away wrath,
But a harsh word stirs up anger.

It is understandable that we feel our emotions strongly but God wants us to learn to first take those emotions to Him, to cry out to Him first, and then when those emotions begin to subside or reach a level that you have more self-control, you can engage in productive conversation. **(Tool #4)**

The last point in this principle is that we also need to learn to be better listeners. As it says in Proverbs 18:13, “He who answers a matter before he hears *it*, *It is* folly and shame to him.” This means that we must be present & engaged. For example it is helpful to turn off phones, face each other and look at each other when talking and be present mentally and show engagement. This is a way that you can honor your spouse. **(Tool #5)**

Principle #2 – Stay Current: Eph 4:26-27 – “*Be angry, and do not sin*”: *do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil*”

Notice in this verse that the focus is not on anger as a sin but rather anger is a signal that a problem must be solved. The command is to solve the problem speedily. And the motive for this speedy reconciliation process is to not give a foothold to the devil. When we fail to solve problems, we cause problems in ourselves and in others.

Jesus says in Matthew 6:34 “Sufficient for the day *is* its own trouble”. So as much as you are able, seek to solve the problems of each day on that day. This is more applicable to the flare up kind of conflict. But it can also be true of the on-going conflict, in that, once you have identified what the source of the issue is, committed it to prayer, you should then seek to set things right as quickly as possible so as to not let things continue to grow and fester in your heart.

As you approach any conflict you want to make sure you approach it with humility and have a good grasp of what is going on. Do you have the facts right? Remember Proverbs 18:3 which says “He who answers a matter before he hears *it*, *It is* folly and shame to him.”

You also will want to check your own motives? Remember that you are on the same team (**Tool #6**). The challenge or conflict that has come up belongs to both of you and you’ll need to work together to address the issue. As a friend of your spouse remember Proverbs 27:6 “Faithful *are* the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy *are* deceitful.” This is another aspect of speaking the truth “in love.”

Lastly, have you considered and dealt with any sin in your own life? Jesus tells a story in Matthew 7 about removing the plank from your eye before you seek to remove the speck in your brother’s eye. Often, when we are hurt or filled with emotion/passion over a situation, the first thing we lose is objectivity. We rarely have the ability to see how we’ve contributed to the situation we are in and see ourselves purely as the victim.

It may be that even after a time of reflective self-examination you still may not see how you’ve contributed to the issue, but even in such cases, seek to remain open to being shown a perspective that is different than the one you have. This openness and humility will greatly aid the process of resolving the conflict and furthering you down the path of reconciliation and healing.

Principle #3 – Attack the Problem, not the Person – Eph 4:29-30 – “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”

Often in the flare up there is a temptation to attack the person because of something they said or did, or in retaliation for an accusation that felt like an initial

attack. This passage warns us about using "unwholesome words". This can happen through name calling, angry outbursts, or accusatory labels like lazy, stupid, etc.

Instead of this type of language, God directs us to use words that will instead build the other up. Admittedly this is VERY HARD to do in the heat of conflict. But if you direct yourself to finding solutions rather than on defending or accusing you'll make progress towards a constructive end rather than a destructive end.

It is helpful to concentrate on actions, not character. In other words, describe what they did and how that made you feel as opposed to saying they are always so inconsiderate, etc. Also, in avoiding the accusation you can use phrases like, "I feel/felt" instead of "you said, you did" etc. **(Tool #7)**

Another tool to help defuse a flare up that also "imparts grace to the hearer" is when you can learn to quickly apologize for any wrongdoing that you have contributed to the problem. Biblically, when we humble ourselves, and seek to see what we have done wrong (rather than what the other person has done wrong) we are more likely to find healing and resolution quickly. **(Tool #8)**

Principle #4 – Act, don't React – Eph 4:31-32 – "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you."

In this passage we can see how those things we are to put off are the reactions of our flesh in the midst of a conflict. The natural tendency of our sin nature is to be defensive about dealing with our own sins. We want to blame-shift, run, react, etc. But God says to put these things off and instead to put on those things which resemble His heart: Kindness, Tender-heartedness, and Forgiveness.

Most often, failure to resolve the on-going conflict comes with this principle. Why might that be? Typically, there are two times to deal with a problem: 1. When you first see it, or 2. When you can't stand it anymore. If you are dealing with a problem earlier, when it has your attention, you can approach it with kindness, tender-heartedness, forgiveness and from a place of love.

When you "seek to resolve conflict" you are being loving, and not being selfish. It is not easy to take on problems, so to do it when you don't want to is a loving thing. But if you just can't stand it anymore, then your reaction is likely to be selfish and your actions are likely to be done with bitterness, anger, hurtful speech, etc.

Distribute the ten tool sheet and then go over it together.

We started the lesson with the first two tools **prayer** (#1) and checking that the **basic needs** are met (#2)

In the first principle, to speak the truth in love we saw tools #3 & #4 to keep our emotions in check and to bring them to God rather than pouring them onto our spouse. As well as tool #5 about being a good listener by being present and engaged in the conversation.

In the second principle, to stay current, we touched on the 6th Tool, that always helpful reminder that you are on the same team. Don't fight each other but fight side by side whatever it is that is threatening your marriage.

In the third principle, attack the problem not the person, we addressed Tool's #7 & #8. Which is to use non-accusatory language like "I feel," or "I felt" as well as the value of approaching a conflict with humility and learning to apologize quickly when you realize that you did something wrong.

The last two tools that we have can also fit under the fourth principle of "Act, don't react" The 9th tool is especially helpful in addressing a deeper on-going conflict. Instead of reacting, seek to set a future time to meet. Pray before, during and after the meeting. This allows for time and present passions to cool and should hopefully provide greater opportunity for mutual objectivity. **(Tool #9)**

In a similar way, tool #10 is a fantastic tool to help avoid reactions. This strategy is to walk and talk. Sometimes it can be helpful to do something while talking, this momentum can help keep emotions from sparking, and take some of the stress and restlessness when just "sitting" across from the other person in a difficult conversation. **(Tool #10)**

Q & A with Guest Speakers

Tell us a little about yourselves?

How long have you been married?

How many Children and their ages?

What's something unique about you that you can share with us?

From: Conflict Resolution

1. What have you learned over the years about conflict resolution in your marriage?
2. Which of the four principles of communication has been the hardest to apply in your marriage?
3. What tools have you found to help you in the *flare up* conflict?
4. What tools have you found help in the *on-going* conflict?
5. Which of the ten tools have you found the most beneficial in your marriage? (A story of applying that tool?)
6. What role has prayer played in your ability to navigate conflict resolution?
7. Can you share a time when healthy communication prevented a potential conflict?

On Your Own:

- Take some time to discuss how communication was modeled for each of you.
- Discuss your own tendencies and responses in a *flare up*.
- Which of the four principles of communication is the hardest to apply in your relationship?
- Which of the ten tools do you find the most beneficial in your relationship?
- Discuss the role of prayer in your communication with each other. Talk about ways where you can incorporate prayer together in the flare ups and in the on-going conflict.
- Decide as a couple which tool from the list you would like to work on.

An activity to help address the On-going conflict:

- List out the **main problems** you see in your marriage.
- How does **your spouse** contribute to these problems?
- How do **you** contribute to these problems?
- What do you want to see **changed** in your marriage?
- What do you want to see changed in **your spouse**?
- What do you want to see changed in **you**?

Resources

[10 Tools to help in Conflict Resolution](#)