



Conflict

Welcome back! So far we have talked about the covenant nature of marriage, roles and responsibilities, and have begun talking about communication. Today we are going to expand on the ideas we started last week and enter into the area of handling conflict in a constructive manner. This is so important because conflict has a way of sneaking up on you when you least expect it. Let me share something that happened to us that illustrates just how quickly the unexpected pops up.

The other day we were all sitting around the kitchen table enjoying a late and leisurely breakfast. Peggy had found some blueberries at the local market, and Katie and I were really enjoying them, but each in our own way. Katie was being very cautious about which ones she picked, selecting the largest ones and avoiding the ones that were hard or small. I, on the other hand, was simply reaching over and popping them randomly into my mouth. Peggy got up to refill her coffee cup when all of a sudden she heard me yelling, "Abort! Abort!" She got back to the table in time to witness the offending blueberry still sliding across the plate in front of me as I grabbed my sweet coffee and began frantically swishing it around in my mouth.

Katie and Peggy looked at each other and immediately broke into giggles, much to my distress. I tried to mutter an excuse to cover my extreme reaction, but Katie interrupted me and said, "It's okay, Dad! Blueberries aren't supposed to be crunchy!"

Isn't life a lot like that? We go through life and most of the time everything is good. We may not have the sweetest of days, but the sweet and semi-tart balance each other out and we cruise along pretty easily. Then all of a sudden, completely unexpectedly, something comes up that has us yelling, "Abort! Abort!" and our world kind of comes to a stop until that crisis can be handled. It would sure be a lot easier if life, and blueberries, were clearly marked for us. Since they aren't, and since conflict happens in every marriage, we have to be ready with

the tools needed to handle the unexpectedly crunchy life situations. That's where we are going to spend our time today.

One of the rules taught by Thumper in the Disney Classic Bambi was "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." Those are pretty good words to live by to a certain extent, but they do have their limitations. I would agree that you shouldn't spout off the first things that come to your mind when you are angry, but once you've cooled down it's time to stop the silent treatment. All that accomplishes is causing you to stew about the issue and develop resentments. It is impossible to resolve things without talking through them, and those talks need to happen pretty frequently or you will wind up saving up emotional bombs to drop on each other.

Emotional bombs are those choice tidbits that you've saved up from a previous conflict. They really have nothing to do with the problem you are trying to resolve, but there are just enough similarities that you can lob one over the fence. The power of those bombs come in their surprise; since they are saved from the past, the other person doesn't see it coming. While this ammunition may seem like it gives you a tactical advantage, it is devastating to healthy conflict. When you are trying to resolve an issue, you must stick to that issue. It is highly unfair to insert an unrelated topic into the mix. On a side note, people tend to do this when they feel they are "losing" the argument; the fallacy is that there really aren't winners or losers. When you are resolving an issue the objective is to do just that, resolve the issue. It isn't about one person being right and the other wrong, the idea is to have clear communication so you can each understand where the other is coming from. To help this happen there are some strategic things you can do to up your chances of success.

First, you have to choose the time and place for your discussion wisely. We briefly touched on this last week. You should be careful to consider if there is enough time to completely examine the issue in a way that will leave each person feeling understood. You also need to be sure that your surroundings are appropriate: limit or eliminate all distractions, including technology, children, and tasks. You should also be sure to "check the temperature" in the room; by that I mean to check to see if you are both emotionally calm enough to have a productive conversation. Finally you should pray together before even beginning to address the issue; cover your marriage with prayer asking that you are able to really hear each other and come to a mutually agreeable solution.

When you begin addressing the issue, be sure to attack the problem and not each other. It is very easy to fall into the trap of criticizing your spouse's personality or character instead of staying focused on what happened. If the issue is laundry not being put in the hamper, don't overgeneralize that and claim that your spouse is just lazy. If the issue is the kitchen not being cleaned to the expectation of the other, don't make statements about the other person being a slob. Before beginning a conflict, it would be prudent to ask yourself why this is so important to you. In these examples, the real issue is most likely one spouse feeling used in the area of service to the other. That is the real issue that needs to be addressed, not the clothes or the dishes.

If you take a those minutes to examine where your own heart is in the matter you will have a clearer idea of what the conversation needs to be. The fact is that most things we argue about in our marriages say more about our own personal intolerances than it does about the other person; it isn't a sin to drop dirty laundry on the floor or to not have a pristine countertop. Those things are simply irritations and how you handle them says volumes about your character. They may need to be addressed if they are a manifestation of a broader issue, but it is a good idea to keep your conflicts proportionate to the problem. Not everything is of equal importance; you need to distinguish between those things.

By having a clear idea in your own head about what the actual issue is that has you upset, you can stay focused on the topic that needs to be addressed. It's important that any given conversation have only one focal point. If you are wanting to address how chores are split up in your house to more fairly distribute the burden, then keep your conversation about that and don't veer off into who left the laundry in the washer last week.

Going right along with having a laser sharp focus as you begin a conversation, is the practice of having some solutions in mind. One administrator that Peggy worked for had the rule that any complaint or concern could be brought to her attention, as long as at least one possible solution was also presented. This worked well because it kept the employees from adopting a defeatist attitude that nothing could be done to fix the problem. The same thing applies in marriage; there is always a solution, it just isn't always immediately apparent. You need to keep in mind that the best solution may not be the one that you have already thought of; the purpose for thinking of a possible solution is to start thinking in creative ways to find the best resolution for the issue.

As you are discussing the issue you have identified, it is important to be accurate in your description of what is going on. Do you remember back in elementary school when they were teaching you test taking strategies for multiple choice and true/false questions? One thing they taught was that you should avoid the choices that contained the words always and never. That was because it is very, very rarely true that something always happens or that it never happens. It can be very often or very rarely, but always and never are usually not accurate. Self-fulfilling prophecies are strong; when a person hears that they behave in a certain manner all the time, they tend to increase that behavior even more. If you are trying to change something, emphasizing it to your spouse isn't a good plan for reducing the occurrences!

Going right along with the idea of avoiding always and never is avoiding sarcasm. It isn't funny to the one hearing it. The sad reality is that sarcasm is thinly veiled hatred and often is what is actually felt by the person doing the speaking. If you are feeling tempted to let loose with a real zinger, you need to stop and examine your heart toward your spouse. Healthy conflict has no place for sarcasm - it will quickly change the mood from one of a productive conversation to a barbed argument that is unlikely to resolve anything to anyone's satisfaction.

As you come to a resolution of the problem with your spouse, it is important to take responsibility for your actions. You each need to admit where you were wrong and ask for forgiveness. You need to extend grace to each other and remember that resolution is the objective, being right is not the objective. It may be that the conversation ended with the agreement that one person's idea is the way to proceed. Great! You've met the goal to have a mutually agreed upon way to move forward, and you accomplished that as a team. There is no reason to gloat about how your idea was the best one, and for heaven's sake don't assume that your solution will be right the next time!

The role of forgiveness can't be stressed enough. Each of you must become experts at apologizing and granting forgiveness. Gary Chapman's book, *The Five Languages of Apology*, suggests that there are five different components to an apology. Just like in his book, *The Five Love Languages*, each element speaks to different people. The five components he lists are: expressing regret, accepting responsibility, offering restitution, exhibiting true repentance, and requesting forgiveness. When you express regret, it is just

that; you show that are truly saddened by what has happened and you understand how it made the other person feel. Accepting responsibility means that you own up to your part in the conflict without trying to shift the blame anywhere else. When you offer restitution, you try to figure out how you can undo the damage that has been done. True repentance means that you are doing everything possible to turn away from the behavior that was offensive and actively move forward in the opposite direction. When someone exhibits true repentance there should be a noticeable difference in behavior. The act of requesting forgiveness means just that; you say that you're sorry and ask the other to forgive you. A wise person would find out which combination of those components spoke the loudest to his or her spouse. Just like with the love languages, it does no good to shout at the top of your lungs in the wrong language.

One challenge that many couples have to deal with is the problem of each spouse forgiving himself or herself. The problem comes when those voices inside of your head yell lies that are impossible for you to ignore. Those voices usually evoke feelings of insecurity and inferiority. They don't speak words of love; rather they speak words of division and isolation. It is very difficult to not focus on the part that is telling you those negatives; as humans we are kind of wired to attack ourselves. When that starts happening it is very difficult to give grace to yourself for the mistakes that keep coming back to haunt you. The problem with not forgiving yourself is that you then project those feelings of bitterness onto those around you. It's true that we are our own worst enemies and often destroy our relationships with our own two hands. By refusing to forgive others or ourselves we are acting as if we are more important or knowledgeable than God. If He is willing to forgive everyone, who are we to say that any person is unworthy of forgiveness? That's a dangerous road to travel down. So how do we break that cycle of unforgiveness and get to a place that the affirming voices of grace overpower the destructive ones filled with sin?

We found the power of claiming God's promises, though we're more than a little ashamed to admit that we've waited so long to dive into this one. I've always heard people say to memorize scripture that pertains to whatever situation. I had flipped through and found verses in the past, but it was with a "that's nice" type of attitude because I didn't know what to do with them once I found them.

This is where the power is: after you find the verses that apply to your situation (whether

that is forgiving yourself, dealing with loss, questioning your faith, or whatever) then you can claim those promises in prayer. The connection we hadn't made before was the one between the promise and the prayer. God tells us that whatever we ask in His name, He will give us. That isn't a genie verse; we don't get to ask for the pony or the new condo on the ocean. The things we ask for have to be the things that are in line with God's will; and that's where the power comes in. His promises are His will for us. We can and should expect Him to keep His promises, so when He tells us in scripture that He will do something for us, then we can claim that promise in prayer and expect Him to fulfill it. It is all based in the promises God has already made to us.

I'm not a Bible scholar, so I can't quote or quickly find many of the passages that I might need on my own - but technology has fixed that problem. If you go to a Bible website like biblegateway.com you can enter search terms to find verses that relate to what you are struggling with, or if you visit a Christian bookstore there are many options of Bible promise books. I'm thinking that most people don't understand how to use those promises because I usually find those types of books in the discount or clearance racks. That's surprising given the power they hold. The book versions are nice because they are usually specific to men, women, college students, and the like, so they include many of the issues that those groups of individuals tend to face; plus that they are usually small enough to fit easily into a purse or briefcase. I'm telling you, this was revolutionary for us.

In addition to finding and claiming the promises from the Bible, you can pray from your heart and know that God will respond to you. He isn't surprised by the things that you beat yourself up over; He created you and knows what your tendencies are. He wants you to go to Him with those hurts so He can heal you. He already knows if you are struggling with a lack of security, loyalty, responsibility, caring, order, openness, or connection. He knows and He wants to help you grow beyond that. All you have to do is ask and He will provide you with the work you need to do to become the person He designed you to be before sin entered the picture. Change and forgiveness are possible through Him, but you have to be honest with yourself and open with Him about what is going on.

Would you please join me in prayer right now. Heavenly Father, we come before you today as your quarrelsome children and ask for your forgiveness. We tend to get caught up in ourselves and selfishly push our own agendas rather than to focus on the needs of our

spouse. Thank you for coming to model how we should act toward each other. Thank you for the hearts of these couples. Protect them as they move closer to you and to each other. In Your Son's Name we pray. Amen.

Be sure to complete the project and devotions for this week, then join us next week as we uncover the truth about intimacy.

