

# DEALING WITH CONFLICT AND LEARNING TO FORGIVE

*Wednesday Night Q&A Study*

**Key Text:** Ephesians 4:31–32 — “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”

## Introduction: Conflict and Forgiveness Go Hand in Hand

Conflict is something we will deal with throughout our lives, no matter our age. Children have conflict. Teenagers have conflict. Husbands and wives have conflict. Families have conflict. People at work have conflict. And yes, even Christians in the church have conflict.

The reason we deal with conflict is ultimately because of sin. At the end of the day, we are all still dealing with the flesh! We have different personalities, different opinions, different backgrounds, different expectations, and sometimes we simply see things differently.

The Bible does not pretend that Christians will never have disagreements. Instead, the Bible teaches Christians how to respond when disagreements come.

While dealing with conflict, we must also learn how to forgive. Personally, I believe the two go hand in hand. You cannot have meaningful relationships without eventually encountering conflict, and you cannot maintain meaningful relationships without learning to forgive.

One of the clearest examples of conflict between believers is Paul and Barnabas.

**Acts 15:36–41** — “And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do. And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work. And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; And Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches.”

These were not carnal men who cared nothing about God. These were two men who loved God, had served God together, and had seen God do tremendous things through their ministry. Yet “the contention was so sharp” that they separated.

That should remind us that spiritual people can disagree. Good people can misunderstand one another. People who love the Lord can still have conflict.

But that conflict did not have to define the rest of their lives. Years later, Paul said concerning Mark:

**2 Timothy 4:11** — “Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry.”

Something had changed. Whatever problems existed in the past were not allowed to permanently destroy their usefulness and fellowship.

**The question is not whether we will ever have conflict. The question is, what will we do when conflict comes?**

## I. REMEMBER HOW THE BIBLE SAYS WE SHOULD TREAT ONE ANOTHER

Before we ever talk about resolving conflict, we need to remember how God expects us to view and treat one another.

### Love One Another

**John 15:12** — “This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.”

Our starting point toward another Christian should be love, not suspicion, irritation, or assuming the worst.

### Serve One Another

**Galatians 5:13** — “For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.”

Instead of asking, “What should they be doing for me?” Christianity teaches us to ask, “How can I serve them?”

### Be Gracious Toward One Another

**Ephesians 4:2** — “With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;”

That word forbearing is important. It carries the idea of putting up with, bearing with, and being patient with one another.

Sometimes Christian love means realizing that everybody is not going to think like me, act like me, or respond like me.

### Be Likeminded Toward One Another

**Romans 15:5** — “Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus:”

There should be a desire among believers for unity.

**Amos 3:3** — “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?”

We are not going to agree on every preference or opinion, but if we are going to walk together, there must be agreement on the things that truly matter and a willingness to give grace on the things that do not.

## Give Preference to One Another

**Romans 12:10** — “Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another;”

**The flesh says, “What about me?”**

**The Spirit teaches us to say, “What about them?”**

The Bible teaches us to value our relationships with one another and to invest in them with love, service, patience, grace, and kindness.

If we begin there, many conflicts will never become as large as they otherwise would.

## II. RESOLVING CONFLICT BIBLICALLY

As I have already stated, every important relationship encounters conflict, and relationships with others in your church are no exception.

**How you resolve conflict, however, will either undermine or strengthen that relationship.**

So what should we do?

### A. Go to the Other Person

**Matthew 18:15** — “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.”

Notice the simplicity of Jesus’ instruction:

**“Go.”**

And notice who you are supposed to go to:

**“Thy brother.”**

**Not everybody else.**

Most differences between Christians could probably be resolved if both parties would simply sit down and talk to one another.

We tend to talk about people when the Bible tells us to talk to them.

Sometimes the situation may not be nearly as big or as bad as you think if you simply talk to the other person.

**Matthew 18:15** — “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.”

There may have been a misunderstanding. You may not know the entire story. They may not realize that they hurt you. You may have misunderstood their intentions.

But you will never know if you never talk.

And always remember:

**The goal is not to prove that you are right and they are wrong. The goal is reconciliation.**

Jesus said, “thou hast gained thy brother.”

**Winning the argument while losing your brother is not winning.**

## B. Share With Someone Else Who Can Be Part of the Solution

If going privately does not resolve the situation, Jesus gives the next step:

**Matthew 18:16–17** — “But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”

**There is an important difference between seeking help and spreading gossip.**

When you involve another person, it should be because that person can become part of the solution, not because you are trying to recruit someone to your side.

You also need to make sure the person you involve is spiritual, mature, and honest.

And you need to be prepared for something else:

**When they hear BOTH sides of the story, they may tell you that you are wrong!**

If I only want someone who will agree with me, I am not really looking for reconciliation. I am looking for validation.

Again, remember the ultimate goal:

**Reconciliation.**

## III. FORGIVE FROM YOUR HEART

This is where things become difficult from a fleshly standpoint.

**Talking about forgiveness is easy until you are the one who has been hurt.**

That is why forgiveness cannot simply be produced by the flesh.

**Galatians 5:16** — “This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.”

The flesh wants retaliation.

The flesh wants to hold a grudge.

The flesh wants the other person to hurt as we hurt.

The flesh wants to keep bringing the offense back up.

But the Spirit produces something completely different.

Sometimes forgiveness can even take place in our own hearts without ever going to the other person. Not every irritation, careless comment, personality difference, or minor offense needs a confrontation.

Sometimes we simply need enough grace to let something go.

That is hard, but it can happen when we walk in the Spirit.

Before we can practice biblical forgiveness, however, we need to understand what forgiveness actually is.

## A. Misconceptions Concerning Forgiveness

### **Forgiveness Is Not the Same as Apologizing**

Saying “I’m sorry” is not exactly the same as saying “Please forgive me.”

An apology expresses regret. Biblical forgiveness addresses an offense and the debt it creates.

### **Forgiveness Does Not Require Forgetting**

The Bible never commands us to erase something from our memory.

In many situations, forgetting would be practically impossible.

Forgiveness is not pretending something never happened.

When the Bible speaks of God remembering our sins no more, it does not mean that an omniscient God somehow loses knowledge. It means He chooses not to hold those sins against us.

### **Forgiveness Is Not Primarily a Feeling**

Many people wait until they feel forgiving before they forgive.

But biblical forgiveness is first an act of obedience, not an emotional response.

**Jeremiah 17:9** — “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?”

If we wait until our feelings tell us to forgive, we may wait a very long time.

We forgive because God tells us to forgive.

Sometimes the feelings follow the obedience.

## B. The Model for Understanding Forgiveness

If we are going to understand forgiveness, we must understand how God has forgiven us.

Our model for forgiveness is not human wisdom; it is divine grace.

**Ephesians 4:32** — “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”

Notice the standard:

**“Even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”**

When I struggle to forgive someone else, I need to remember how much God has forgiven me.

**Colossians 3:13** — “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.”

The question is no longer simply:

**“Do they deserve my forgiveness?”**

The question becomes:

**“How has Christ treated me?”**

God never asks us to extend grace without first reminding us of the grace that He has extended toward us.

## C. The Means by Which God Forgives

Forgiveness is not merely a feeling God has toward us; forgiveness involves a declaration and promise God makes.

**Isaiah 43:25** — “I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.”

God tells us that we are forgiven.

**It Is a Promise**

God promises “not to remember” our sins.

There is a difference between forgetting and not remembering.

Forgetting is passive.

**Not remembering is deliberate.**

God does not cease to know what happened. He chooses not to hold our forgiven sins against us.

That gives us a helpful way to understand how to forgive others.

**Biblical forgiveness is a promise not to continually use a forgiven offense as a weapon against that person.**

I will not continually bring it up to punish you.

I will not continually bring it up to others to embarrass you.

I will not continually use it as justification for retaliation.

That does not mean that every consequence disappears, that trust is immediately restored, or that wisdom and boundaries are unnecessary. Forgiveness and trust are related, but they are not identical. Forgiveness can be given; trust often has to be rebuilt.

Until we understand what forgiveness truly is—and what it is not—we will either excuse sin, avoid obedience, or carry burdens God never intended us to bear.

**Biblical forgiveness begins with seeing how God forgave us, not simply looking at how deeply someone hurt us.**

## **Closing Illustration — The Forgiveness of Gladys Staines**

On January 23, 1999, missionary Graham Staines and his two young sons, Philip, 10, and Timothy, 6, were sleeping in their vehicle in the village of Manoharpur, India.

Graham Staines had spent more than three decades serving in India, much of that time ministering among people suffering from leprosy.

During the night, a mob surrounded their vehicle and set it on fire. Graham and his two boys were unable to escape and died together.

His wife, Gladys Staines, was left without her husband and two sons.

No one would have blamed her for leaving India bitter and broken. Many expected her to return to Australia.

Instead, Gladys remained.

And when she explained what happened when she told their daughter about the deaths of her father and brothers, Gladys said that they agreed together that they would forgive those responsible.

Gladys later testified that she held no bitterness toward the killers and spoke about the healing that comes through forgiveness.

Graham and the boys were buried in India, the country where they had given their lives in service to others. Their grave bore the words of Scripture:

**1 Corinthians 15:55** — “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”

**Think about that.**

Forgiveness did not mean that what those men did was acceptable.

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Forgiveness did not mean that Gladys forgot her husband and sons.

Forgiveness did not mean that there should be no consequences for those responsible.

**It meant that she refused to allow what those men had done to fill her heart with bitterness and control the rest of her life.**

And perhaps that is where this entire lesson comes down to each of us.

Most of us will never be asked to forgive something as horrific as what Gladys Staines was asked to forgive.

But we will be hurt.

We will be disappointed.

We will be misunderstood.

We will have conflict.

Someone will say something they should not say. Someone will do something they should not do.  
Someone we love may deeply disappoint us.

And when that happens, we have a choice.

**We can walk in the flesh and hold onto the offense, or we can walk in the Spirit and forgive.**

**Ephesians 4:32** — “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”

Maybe the greatest motivation for forgiving someone else is simply remembering:

**I HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN TOO.**

## **Resource:**

*Continue by Paul Chappell*