Core Seminars—Marriage

Week 7

**How to Deal with Conflict**

# Introduction Picture these situations:

# -Your spouse is convinced you are wrong, so she relentlessly argues until you give in, OR

# -You are angry at your husband, so you let him have it. You belittle him for his incompetency and his lack of leadership in the family. You were very harsh. You regret some of what you said, but don’t really care because you feel like he deserved what he got.

Conflict seems like such a “normal” part of marriage. People fight all of the time. Yet, we don’t want to tolerate conflict or do anything to make it worse. As with any sin, we want to put it to death (Col 3:5).

In our fallen world, we encounter conflict in the home, workplace, and even in the church. In order to be a good disciple of Christ, it’s important to think through how to deal with *harmful* and *hurtful* communication in marriage. While our study today won’t be comprehensive, I hope it will be a good *introduction* to the topic.

**The Goals of Conflict**

Every conflict provides an opportunity *to grow in wisdom*. In your conflict, you want to grow *wiser* in learning how to handle your fights. One difference between good and bad marriage is not that good marriages don’t experience conflict. Good marriages do have conflict. The difference is that good marriages know how to handle their fights.

The other goal is *to pursue peace*. No matter what our ethnicity, skin color, or background, as a church, we demonstrate our commitment to the gospel by living in unity with one another. As Christians we are called to pursue peace (Ps 34:14; Jer 29:7; 1 Cor 7:15; 2 Cor 13:11). Paul writes, “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Rom 14:19). As the Holy Spirit continues to work in a believer’s heart (Gal 5), we expect to see one of the fruits of the Spirit to be more peace in believer’s life. How much moreso in our marriages. What we desire are our homes and marriages to be characterized by aroma of Christ: not only love and joy, but also peace, unity, and reconciliation.

**How to Deal with Fights**

**Start with looking at your own heart.** Let’s start by thinking about why we fight, as described to us in James 4. [Read v. 1-2]. When we fight we tend to make the other person the problem; they are the enemy; they are the focus of our frustrations and anger. We are convinced they are wrong, and of course, we are right. Their wrongness and our self-righteous rightness can be the fuel that heats the discussion. [Self-righteousness and pride never get you anywhere in a fight.] Yet look at v. 1-2. What’s the cause of our fights and quarrels? Is it our spouse? Rather than expending all of our time and energy in fighting with our spouse, James says the place to start is our own heart. The “desires that battle within us” are the main source of our “fights and quarrels.” When you are fighting, do you take the time to look at your own heart, or do you rush into fight with condemnation for your spouse? The first step in legitimately dealing with our fights is to examine your sinful desires and motives. Jesus says that you are a hypocrite if you don’t deal with your own sin ***before*** you accuse your spouse of sin. “You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:5). Deal with your own sin ***first*** before you attack your spouse. Once you understand what your sin is then take ownership of it and confess it to God, your spouse, and an accountability partner. *Marriage does not work without repentance.*

**Husband: Move toward your spouse and seek understanding (1 Peter 3:7).** Husbands, your goal in an argument is not to win, it’s certainly not to vindicate and protect yourself. *Your goal in an argument is to move towards your wife, seeking to understand just why she’s so upset at you.*Your first priority is to see it the way she sees it. She may not be right. The sin may be hers. But until she is convinced that you are for her, and not against her; until she knows that you understand her and are committed to her good, you’re not going to be able to lead her anywhere, and you’re certainly not going to make any progress in resolving the conflict. Men, be especially quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry (James 1:19).

**Wives: Don’t Protect, Attack, Shut Down, or Run (Gen 3:16).** Wives, it’s not any easier for you. *In the middle of an argument, your desire is going to be to protect yourself from being hurt any further.* You might do that by going on the attack. You might do that by simply withdrawing and shutting him out. You may be tempted to resort to guilt or just plain meanness. Good biblical communication requires that even in the midst of an argument, you remain open to him and invite him in; that you allow him to make his clumsy efforts at understanding what’s going on, and that you not punish him when he doesn’t get it as soon or as well you’d like. In means you don’t back away, but take steps towards him by using respectful and gracious words (even when you are frustrated and confused). It means that you are open to his leadership, when he tries to identify and respond to the sin that’s been committed.

*[STORY: One of the worst fights Sarah and I ever had was because I did the child of all follies for a husband, I agreed to cut her hair. We bought buzz cutters to save money while we were poor in seminary; and Sarah regularly used them to cut my hair. One day, she asked me ot try to cut her hair; and being the dutiful (and very naïve) husband that I was, I said yes. Things started out just fine….I was supposed to trim her hair along the bottom just a little bit…a few minutes into this bold adventure, I mistakenly cut a fairly large and uneven chunk out of her hair, and kept on trying to fix it, and keeping on making things worse. The words, “oh-oh” came out of my mouth. Sarah: “What happened?” “Don’t worry, everything is fine.” I continue to cut and make things worse. My dear wife turned into a fire-breathing, angry dragon. Our conversation quickly degraded into a cesspool of angry comments as we got frustrated with each other. Here’s the kicker: Neither of us sought to really understand each other and what had gone wrong.]*

**A few thoughts on pursuing understanding with your spouse:** When your spouse is wrong, or you’ve gotten angry with your spouse, how do you tend to deal with him or her? (Give them a chance to answer.) Most people build logical arguments (about what they think is right), come up with assumptions about the other person, and sometimes even impute motives on their spouse….and this is even before they enter into a fight! You then do everything you can to persuade your spouse that you are “right.” Yet, the most useful thing you can do is to *first* take time to understand your spouse’s point of view. In Prov 18:2, Solomon writes about how the fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in air his own opinions. How do you build understanding?

***Listen.*** Take the time to listen. James encourages believers to be “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19). You might make the assumption that you are a good listener or maybe you know for sure that you are not a good listener. Rule of thumb: *Don’t talk over each other.*Peoplewho are fighting tend to talk over each other, which means they are basically arguing their own opinion and not listening to their spouse. Slow down, take time to really listen, and summarize. Summarizing is an excellent communication skill. If you can’t summarize (with your spouse verifying that your summary is correct) then you haven’t really listened adequately.

***Ask questions*.** Before you ever state your own opinion, take time to ask a range of questions that will clarify what your spouse thinks. “The purposes of a man’s heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out” (Prov 20:5)

***Clarify assumptions*.** One of the most dangerous things you can do is to assume. Assumptions can often lead us astray because we reading motives into a situation. With too many assumptions, you end up fighting with the person that is in your mind rather than actual person sitting in front of you. In regards to assumptions, two general rule of thumbs: (1) *Don’t assume, instead always ask.*The best way to deal with the assumptions (and make them go away) is to ask questions to test their validity. (2) *Put the best possible “spin” on any particular situation.* Whenever we make assumptions, our sinful nature naturally makes us think the worst of situations. But Paul writes in 1 Cor 13 that Love “always trust” and “always hopes.” DC is famous for different political groups taking several common bits of data and spinning the information to favor their own agenda, biases and frustrations. In marriage, if you are going to interpret what your spouse is doing then let me encourage you to put the best possible “spin” on the situation. If you are assuming something, don’t assume the worst; rather assume the best; assign good intentions to your spouse. And I think you will find that this one simple strategy can relieve a lot of tension in the marital relationship.

**6 More Thoughts on Dealing with Conflict in a Godly Way**

**1. Restrain the tongue and pursue self-control.** Some of you have a hard time controlling your tongue. A loose tongue and consistently careless or mean comments can undermine and hurt your marriage. One of the fruits of the Spirit in Gal 5 is self-control. As we grow in Christ, we should grow in greater self-control in a number of areas in life, including our speech. Solomon writes: “When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise” (Prov 10:19) and also “A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue” (Prov 11:11). A few thoughts on self-control:

*Learning self-control is particularly important when it comes to controlling your temper.* When our emotions take over in the midst of a fight, we are prone to say things we regret. We do what counselors refer to as emotional thinking. What then comes out of our mouth is “stupid talk”– we say things that are mean, unhelpful, unproductive, and we regret later on. If this is happening, it is better for you to consider pausing the fight, cool down your emotions, and pray before you start the conversation again. Prov 16:32 “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.”

One of the best skills you can pick up is to learn *to not respond in kind.*What do I mean by that? When someone says something mean to you, you demonstrate self-control by not responding to your spouse’s provocative comments. The best way to stop a fight is to choose not to have it in the first place.

Realize the hypocrisy you maintain by publically acting very religious but privately tolerating your loose tongue. James 1:26 “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.” James goes on to say that the inconsistency that comes from saying harmful things on the one hand, and then kind things at other times, simply should not be tolerated: “Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?” (James 3:10-11).

Choose your words carefully. Rather than screaming or throwing things, some of you might fight by simply giving subtle jabs or backhanded comments that are meant to hurt your spouse. Rather than a frontal assault, this is more akin to “side swipe.” Others frequently use absolute language like “always” and “never.” Remember that these words are attack words—useful if your goal is to conquer and win, but useless if your goal is to love and understand. Absolute language—saying things like “you always” or “you never”—does not help your marriage. Remember that neither of you have to say everything that’s on your mind, and that often times the best way to deal with a potential argument is not to have it in the first place, but to allow love to cover over a multitude of sins.

James 3 talks about the power and the danger of the tongue and the necessity of believers to tame their tongues. If you struggle with self-control in your speech, that’s good chapter for you to camp out on and to internalize in your devotional times and to study with an accountability partner.

**2. Confess your sin and offer a godly apology** (Jam 5:16; 2 Cor 5:18-21)**.** Husbands and wives are, without exception, sinners. And sin, particularly un-confessed sin, creates a rift in the marital relationship. In Scripture, the way we are instructed to handle sin is to confess it, first to God (because we have primarily sinned against him and his glory) and then to the one against whom we have sinned. Confession of sin – apology – is, however, easier said than done. How do we do it? What does a godly apology look like? Most of us are terrible at confession and apology. We’re combating things like our own egos, our desire to save face, our instinct for self-preservation and defense. All of these things work together to make a “Godly apology” extremely difficult. It involves a humbling of ourselves, a true admission of wrongdoing, a request for forgiveness.

The result of these conflicting internal forces is often an apology that doesn’t address the real sin or wrong, and a response that doesn’t forgive or restore. There are many ways that one can apologize badly, of course, but given our limited time, let me simply point out that . . .an apology is not a weapon to be used to hurt your spouse. This goes without saying seemingly, yet it bears mentioning. When I confess a sin to my wife, the apology should not also be a means of pointing out her sin to her. “I’m sorry I did this, but you did that,” or “I committed this sin and here’s why” are not acceptable means of apology.

The person apologizing must address his or her sin only. An apology should not be a backhanded way of getting the other person to apologize. It is an act of humility, to be done for the glory of God and out of love for the victim of my sin.

**3. Keep short accounts.** Eph 4:26 ‘Never let the sun go down on your anger’ encourages us to keep short accounts with our spouse. Rather than bearing grudges, or letting anger fester, or immaturely stewing your frustrations, start dealing with the problem. The more you simply tolerate the sin or prolong it, the more likely it is going to compound and get worse. So deal with it quickly.

**4. If you need it, take a break or hit the pause button.**  One of the great myths of fighting is that you always have to get things done *right away*, based on pressure we feel from this Eph 4:26 text ‘Never let the sun go down on your anger.’ While the general principle is to get the conflict over with as soon as possible, this shouldn’t be taken as an absolute rule of law. When you get really emotional and angry in the middle of fight, you start saying and doing really dumb things. For many of you, it would be more helpful to give each other some space to cool off, to search the Scriptures and pray, and maybe even give you brain/emotions a rest. And then come back together again and reconsider the issue. Some of you might even be served by getting a good night sleep and reapproaching the conversation the next day, rather than forcing your spouse to fight until 2 in the morning, at which point he or she has no brain cells left and is so exhausted and he or she doesn’t have the right mindset or attitude to do either of you any good. But, if you consider taking a break, be very careful not use the break as an excuse to stew in your self-righteousness or to procrastinate getting the discussion done.

Keep short accounts, but also consider if you need to pause, take a break, and pray if things are getting to be too much. Keeping short accounts does not mean you are not allowed to take breaks or hit the pause button if the fight is getting out of control.

**5. Pray about the fighting.** This goes without saying, but as your pastor, it behooves me to remind you to pray about your conflict. We are often so caught up with correcting our spouse or convincing them we are right that we forget to pray about the problem. Seek God ***before*** you try to resolve the conflict. Be deliberate in asking for the Lord’s help. Sometimes it could mean pausing in the middle of a conflict, and praying for wisdom. Husbands, take the initiative to pray with your wife. I think you would be really surprised at how quickly this can help defuse the tension you are experiencing.

**6. Be humble enough to accept outside help.** One of the hardest and most humbling things to do is to let others in on your struggles. Shame makes us embarrassed to tell others; and lies pop into our head like, “The pastor will think poorly of me when he hears this” or “You should be able to deal with this problem without anyone’s help.” Show humility and draw others in—your small group leader, another couple who you know at church, or an elder and his wife. Marriages don’t prosper on deserted islands. Marriage is a community affair; you need others help! Your marriage will only grow as you sit under the regular teaching of God’s Word, as you include others regularly in your married life, and you act humble enough to go for help when things are not going well. Every husband and wife should have at least one other same-sex person who they are talking with regularly for accountability and fellowship, which includes talking about how your marriage is going.