



# Treating Muscle Tension

*Resolving Conflict within the Body of Christ*



Bible study by Jacqueline Rasar, Ph.D.

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# INTRODUCTION

*TREATING MUSCLE TENSION* immediately makes me think of exercise. Ugh! At one time in my life, I became winded just taking a leisurely stroll around the block. But all of that changed in 2006 when I committed to train for a half-marathon (13.1 miles). Believe me, I experienced some muscle tension. It would have been much easier to stop the exercise regimen and let my muscles return to their out-of-shape state, but treating the muscle tension and continuing resulted in personal growth and a sense of satisfaction when I ran across that finish line.

Dealing with conflict can produce similar results. Conflict resolution can also lead to unity and the experience of grace within the body of Christ, and that in itself is a victory.

Have you spent much time and effort into discovering why conflict occurs? If you were to define conflict in your own words, what would you say? These are very important questions. And God-honoring conflict resolution will rarely be experienced if these foundational aspects of conflict are not understood. So, let's dig into the Word together to gain some insight.

*Jackie*

## *About this study:*

WNAC provides this Bible study as part of a yearlong emphasis on Body Builders: *Strengthening one another in Christ*. Women Nationally Active for Christ seeks to promote unity within the greater Body of Christ by engaging women in the study of God's Word, encouraging each another through fellowship and involving every woman in sharing the gospel through her God-designed roles in the home, church, community and world.



## *About the author:*

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# CAUSE FOR CONFLICT

*What is conflict and why does it occur?*



## PART 1

**FOCUS:** Genesis 25:19-26.

The Bible brims with examples of people in conflict. God used many of these people in powerful ways, and many devoted themselves to doing God's will. While it may seem that conflict has no place in the church, the reality is, conflict *happens* within the Body of Christ. Let's look at two examples of conflict found in the book of Genesis to discover the nature of conflict and why it occurs.

In the beginning of Genesis 25, we find an account of Abraham's death and a listing of his descendants.

**Take a moment now and read Genesis 25: 19-26.**

Beginning in verse 19 we learn that Isaac, Abraham's son, prayed that God would allow him and his wife to have children. What do you notice about Rebekah's response in verse 22 and 23?

The Lord's response to Rebekah reminds us that conflict is a part of life. Genesis 3 teaches us that sin entered the world and that all people are now affected by depravity. Sometimes it is a challenge to think about babies being depraved. They are so precious and sweet. Cuddling with a baby is such a comforting feeling. Yet, Rebekah's experience reminds us that life includes conflict. And in this example, the conflict occurs among family members.

*Have you experienced conflict in your family?*

*Have you sensed an underlying tension for many years?*

If so, then it will come as no surprise to you that conflict is a part of life.

*Have you experienced conflict in your church family?*

**REFLECTION:** Take some time and write down a few examples of conflict from your life experience in the margin. I encourage you to evaluate your own conflict style throughout this study, and focusing on a personal example will hopefully make this a practical study.



## PART 2

**FOCUS:** Genesis 25:19-28

Conflict? Most people know how it makes them feel...nervous, a sharp pain in the stomach, worried, scared, etc., But how would *you* define the word conflict or confrontation?

**Conflict** can be defined in the following ways:

- competitive or opposing action of incompatibles
- the opposition of persons
- lack of agreement or harmony
- discord

Look back at the personal examples of conflict you identified in Part 1 of this study. *Do any of these definitions get at what you were experiencing? Which one(s)?*

We've established that conflict is a part of life. After reviewing these definitions, do you see that truth confirmed? Let's face it. We will not always be in agreement with everyone—or all those with whom we interact. It's an impossible, unachievable goal. People are complex and opinionated. When we combine this aspect of humanity with the varying personalities, life experiences and worldviews present on this earth, it becomes even more clear that conflict is a given.

Conflict is often caused by anxiety and/or stress. This means that when people are stressed out, there is a greater likelihood for a conflict to emerge. Unresolved conflict can result in physical, psychological and spiritual problems.

Go back to your personal list of conflict experiences. *Can you identify a stressor in your life at this time?*

Think about the results of the conflict on you personally in relation to the above noted categories (physical, psychological, spiritual). For example, did you get more headaches or have an upset stomach? Those are common physical results of stress and conflict. Did you feel depressed, angry, or paranoid? Those are common psychological results of unresolved conflict. Did you want to avoid church or pray less? Those are common spiritual results of unresolved conflict.

PHYSICAL

PSYCHOLOGICAL

SPIRITUAL

*What did you do to resolve the conflict? Is it still unresolved?*

Some conflicts do not require a confrontation, but many do. Remember, unresolved conflict always has negative repercussions.



**Confrontation** can be defined as follows:

- Presenting an idea to the person he/she may not see otherwise
- Not attacking or condemning another person
- To face especially in challenge
- To cause to meet
- To bring face to face

These definitions of confrontation remind us that confrontation is not always bad or harmful. Actually, it's quite the opposite. Confrontation done in the right spirit is both good and helpful.

**Read Genesis 25:19-28. Especially focus on verses 27 and 28.**

*What were the results of Jacob and Esau's unresolved conflict?*

Rather than embracing each other's differences, it appears Jacob and Esau allowed the differences to divide them. They lived in conflict with each other. A powerful result of their unresolved conflict led to division in their family as well. Rebekah loved Jacob more than she loved Esau. The point is this, differences can be divisive, and the consequences can be long term and serious.

**REFLECTION:** Pray that God would help you see the seriousness of conflict and give you an openness for resolving conflict in your personal life. If the devastating consequences of unresolved conflict are true, then the blessings of resolving conflict are equally true and powerful.

If you are feeling ashamed or sad at this point in the study, please know that personal and spiritual growth can result from humbly acknowledging personal struggle. Don't lose heart. This study is for you.

### **PART 3**

**FOCUS:** Genesis 25:29—26:35

We have established so far that conflict is a part of life and resolving conflict is possible. Let's continue to glean insight from Scripture. The account of Jacob and Esau can teach us several important truths about the nature of conflict.

**Read Genesis 25: 29-34.** (*What a description of sibling rivalry!*)

**Conflict creeps up in moments of weakness.** That's the lesson we learn from these verses. A weak (and hungry) Esau ended up making a regretful decision—selling his birthright. Jacob maximized on Esau's weakness and took advantage of the situation. At either end of the spectrum, we find a connection between conflict and weakness. Weakness in some form or fashion can precipitate conflict.

*Can you relate more to Esau or Jacob in one of your personal experiences with conflict? In what way?*

**Now, read Genesis 26:1-5.** In spite of the growing conflict between Jacob and Esau, God clearly continued to shower blessings in their family.



*Conflict does not result in the absence of God's blessings.* Rather, conflict offers a powerful reminder that God will continue to bless His children. This is a reassuring truth. When conflict emerges, how will this emphasis impact your life? Have you ever attempted to look for the blessings of God in the midst of conflict? I challenge you to do so. Surely, we would all work to resolve conflict more quickly and in healthier ways if we kept our focus on the blessings of God.

**Continue reading Genesis 26; focusing on verses 34-35.** Isaac obeyed God and knew evident reminders of God's presence despite the challenges and conflict he faced in Gerar.

*Conflict may be intergenerational in nature.* More times than not, unresolved conflict comes back.

*Have you experienced this phenomenon in your own life?*

*If so, when and how did the conflict come back?*

*How had the nature of the conflict changed?*

*How did you feel?*

**REFLECTION:** Be encouraged to commit to resolving conflict in your life. By the end of this study, you will have the tools to resolve conflict in a God-honoring way.

#### **PART 4**

**FOCUS:** Genesis 26-27

**Read Genesis 26 and 27.**

Let's take a closer look at the most significant conflict that emerged in the lives of Isaac, Jacob, and Esau.

*Use the provided outline and take some time to summarize each passage in your own words.*

Sample outline:

- I. Genesis 26
  - A. 26:1-5: God promises Isaac that his offspring would be blessed.
  - B. 26:6-11: Isaac's lie (that Rebekah is his sister) is discovered by Abimelech.
  - C. 26:12-16: Isaac becomes rich and is asked to leave Gerar.
  - D. 26:17-22: Isaac digs a series of wells and conflict arises over them.
  - E. 26:23-25: God reiterates his promise to Isaac
  - F. 26:26-33: Isaac and Abimelech make peace with one another.
  - G. 26:34-35: Isaac and Rebekah are not pleased with Esau's marriages.

## II. Genesis 27

- A. 27:1-4: Isaac is nearing death and he invites Esau to prepare a meal for him, and Isaac intends to bless Esau as his eldest son
- B. 27:5-13: Rebekah initiates a dishonest attempt for Jacob to be blessed by Isaac instead of Esau
- C. 27:14-17: Jacob obeys Rebekah and pretends to be Esau
- D. 27:18-25: Isaac believes that Jacob is Esau
- E. 27:26-29: Isaac blesses Jacob
- F. 27:30-38: Esau overhears Isaac blessing Jacob and is overwhelmed with sorrow
- G. 27:39-40, Isaac responds to Esau with a commitment to honor the blessing he gave to Jacob
- H. 27:41-45, Esau's anger is so great towards Jacob that Esau plans to kill Jacob, so Isaac sends Jacob away
- I. 27:46, Rebekah is not pleased that Jacob is sent away

*God can use conflict to fulfill His plan and promises.* Conflict fills these two chapters, yet a study of the overall passage reveals that conflict served as part of God's plan. Notice that in the midst of the multiple conflicts, God reiterated His blessing and promise to Isaac—an amazing example of God's grace and foresight. I don't know about you, but it seems counterintuitive to me that God would allow such conflict and deceit. Why would He choose people so prone to conflict to carry out His will? Perhaps the lesson is that God is great and merciful, and He will accomplish His will and purposes despite the failures of people.

*God uses the weak of the world to reveal His strength and power.* God can work in and through the conflicts in our lives. Paul declared in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

Genesis 26 and 27 includes conflict between parents, parents and children, siblings, in-laws, acquaintances and friends. Yet, a common theme among the various types of conflict in this passage is *selfishness*. Rebekah was selfish because she did not want her favorite son to move away or be without his father's blessing. Abimelech was selfish because he did not want Isaac to have all the wealth in Gerar. Jacob was selfish because he did not resist the deceitful plan to steal the blessing.

*In what ways are you selfish?*

*Has selfishness ever been a catalyst for conflict in your life? Explain.*



Outlining large chunks of Scripture can really assist in understanding the context of a Biblical truth. Why not make it your practice? I know it has been helpful for me.

*Jackie*



Two common themes in conflict are selfishness and good intentions never followed through to completion.

**Good intentions** surface as another theme for conflict. Isaac appeared to have good intentions throughout these circumstances in his life. Maybe that has been the case for you, too. Unfortunately, good intentions do not always result in harmonious relationships.

**REFLECTION:** Thoroughly communicating intentions makes for good strategy in avoiding this pitfall. Many conflicts were brewing under the surface in Isaac's life. Awareness of underlying tension and commitment for resolving conflicts early-on may also prevent big blow-ups in our relationships as well.

## PART 5

**FOCUS:** Genesis 28

The repercussions of the long-term conflict between Jacob and Esau continue in the next chapter.

**Take a moment now and read all of Genesis 28.**

*What do you notice about the nature of unresolved conflict in this passage?*

**Division** and **bitterness** emerge as two primary results of Jacob and Esau's unresolved conflict. Esau's anger led him to do exactly the opposite of Isaac's wishes for Jacob, and he married a Canaanite woman. This is a prime example of bitterness.

*Have you ever made a decision just to spite someone?*

Surely, this type of behavior only prolongs the conflict.

Jacob seemed to make the most of the situation, and his reaction was to follow God. At this point, Jacob and Esau were getting farther and farther apart in their relationship. Division resulting from conflict can be two-sided. On the one hand, division maintains the conflict because the people involved in the conflict cannot come together to seek resolution. Yet the flip side reveals that sometimes division provides needed space (apart from the conflict) to bring perspective to a situation. Good thing or bad thing? Each conflict merits its own evaluation. Apparently, Jacob benefited from the space apart from Esau.

*Why is conflict resolution such a challenging topic?*

*Has your view of conflict changed since you began this study? How?*

*Think about significant conflicts in your own past. How have they impacted your life?*

**REFLECTION:** Selfishness, personal differences, good intentions, underlying tensions and personal stressors can all be cause for conflict. How do these figure into your own life? Awareness is the first step to healing and change.



# PICK AND CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES

*Which conflicts merit attention?*



## PART 1

**FOCUS:** Genesis 37, 38-39

Like a newbie entering a gym filled with loads of equipment and lots of activity, conflict may leave us wondering, “Where do we start? How do we know which conflicts to resolve?” Or like a rigorous gym workout session, maybe conflict has left us aching and sore all over—and unsure of steps to take for soothing those muscles. Both of these scenarios illustrate the first step in resolving conflict: picking and choosing our battles.

“How do we know which conflicts to resolve?” we may be wondering. That’s a great question. I firmly believe not every conflict demands confrontation. God heals many things over time and it really is possible to choose to forgive and let things go without talking to another person.

However, it is best to resolve a conflict if it’s damaging a relationship (ongoing tension) or if bitterness is festering under the surface. For example, imagine you are upset with your husband because for two weeks in a row, he has not kept his promise to mow the lawn each Saturday during the summer. Now week three, you pull in the driveway after Saturday shopping and the grass is as high as ever. How would you react? For almost anyone, the reaction would include some level of anger and most likely a negative thought toward the husband. This example illustrates well the need to pick and choose a battle; the conflict is ongoing and there’s been a growing tension for three weeks.. Depending on personal conflict style, some would want to resolve the conflict on week one. Others would let something like this build for months and months.

Be mindful of the quality of relationships in your life and your own emotions. When you sense an ongoing conflict, take note and pay attention. This situation will probably not be resolved on its own.

*Scripture provides further insight concerning picking and choosing battles.*

**Read Genesis chapters 37, 39–43.**

This is a lengthy passage, but a good example chronicling the impact of conflict over time and the principle that conflict resolution does not always have to occur in the immediate moment. To summarize: Joseph’s brothers hated him because he was the favorite son and because Joseph had revealed to the brothers a dream that he would one day rule over them. This led his brothers to sell him into slavery. Joseph eventually rose to power, but not without a series of struggles, including false accusations by a temptress (Potiphar’s wife) and undeserved time in prison. Widespread famine provided the opportunity for Joseph to reconnect with his brothers. Ultimately, their relationship was restored (Genesis 44-50).

*What initial thoughts come to mind concerning conflict?*

**Rule of Thumb:**  
A conflict needs resolving if it is damaging a relationship or festering bitterness—often under the surface.



**REFLECTION:** We find several layers of conflict in Joseph's life. He serves as a great example of a forgiving person who did not need to confront every conflict, yet was willing to resolve conflict when needed. *(Consider reading this passage again in a paraphrase like The Message, or write your own paraphrase of the passage.)*

## PART 2

**FOCUS:** Genesis 43

Joseph's story reminds us that sometimes conflict is complicated and long term. We must fight one battle at a time.

**REFLECTION:** I asked a few friends to share personal reflections related to Joseph's life as recorded in Genesis. These reflections will pop up during the Bible study this week. Perhaps you could write your own personal reflection based on Joseph's life as a way to gain insight to the conflicts you have faced.

*Waiting...  
(Genesis 43)*

*Genesis 43:30: "Then Joseph made a hasty exit because he was overcome with emotion for his brother and wanted to cry. Going into his private room, he wept there."*

Thirteen years of waiting... It was 13 years from the time Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers to this moment in verse 30. In those 13 years, Joseph's life had taken a divinely appointed, albeit unlikely, turn for the good. As for his brothers... well, they did not fare so well. The famine that descended on the land was hard on their families and they were in a desperate state. Each had time to mull over that single decision that changed all their lives and sparked the catalyst of events leading up to the very moment that reunited them. Each had time to imagine what he would do if reunited with the other. Each had time to think about revenge and reconciliation...for 13 long years.

How would I have reacted after seeing my betrayer after so long a time? 13 years is a long time to think and play-out and plan. Would I have pushed my status and wealth in their faces to let them know that I didn't stay where they put me? Would I have wielded my power to punish them for what they had done? Or, would I have forgiven the one who wronged me? Would I have wept at the idea of restoration? Would I have dared to hope that I could see my loved ones once again?

Reconciliation is emotional, no matter how long we have to deal with our thoughts and emotions. In verse 30, we see Joseph's emotional breakdown in the face of a long awaited conflict resolution. For me, this verse is almost painful to read. During my separation and divorce, I felt those strong feelings of being betrayed by a loved one, and then the equally strong emotions associated with moving forward from that point of my life. In all these phases, I admire Joseph so much. Through daily communion with our Heavenly Father, Joseph was able to maintain his dignity, composure and core values in the face of many adversities, and this long-awaited reunion in Chapter 43 was no different. Because of his close relationship with God, although Joseph could not stifle the strong emotional response that came when the reunion finally happened, he ultimately chose restoration and not revenge. And, I just love that.

—R. L.

## PART 3

**FOCUS:** Genesis 50

Resolving conflict doesn't have to feel like a war. Sometimes the *battle* is quite calm. If you can resolve the small conflicts, then it will be easier to fight the bigger ones. The key is, all battles take courage.

*Joseph displayed great courage in his life. How do you compare?*

*What do you think stands in the way of courage when a conflict needs resolving?*

In my experience, most people are scared of confrontation, fearing it will only make things worse. My hope is that, as you continue in this study, it will bolster your courage and help you engage in conflict resolution with healthy and appropriate communication skills.

**REFLECTION:** Read the following reflection. Can you relate to her experience?

Conflict can be very hard to deal with. Sometimes I think once something is resolved then it is over. But the funny thing about conflict is it can rear its ugly head over and over in all kinds of different ways.

In church ministry there should be no room for conflict. Sadly, there often is. Sometimes we don't agree or we say and do things that hurt each other. As a pastor's wife, I have been surprised by the amount of conflict among fellow church members. Our words and actions may be critical of someone who is trying their best, or a differing opinion leads to tension. Conflict then arises. I, for one, have not always handled conflict in the best way because I was afraid. But, I have learned something from the life of Joseph that has helped me... His love and compassion for his brothers.

Has anyone ever treated me like Joseph was treated? No. Have I ever been hurt by people I love? Yes. What can I learn from Joseph? Love people despite the situation. Sometimes we say and do things we shouldn't, but God is forgiving and merciful to us. He wants us to be the same way. We must put up with each other, and when conflict rears its ugly head in our churches, we should love each other through it and always forgive.

—W.A.

Another reason people fail to engage in conflict resolution is stubbornness. Consider the following reflection on this topic.

When thinking about the word conflict, negative connotations come to mind. In my mind, it is and has been a very negative thing that I have allowed to bring me down. We have all encountered conflict whether it is with coworkers, our spouse, children, or friends. However, although conflict is a negative word to me, it can have a positive outcome and can allow us to grow both in our spiritual and emotional well being. Because of the personality I have, strong willed and stubborn, there have been many conflicts that I have had to deal with in my own life.



**Resolution Principle:**  
Conflict is often multi-layered; fight only one battle at a time.



Joseph was truly a man of God and was faced with many conflicts throughout his life. I believe the biggest conflict that he had to overcome was when his brothers were overcome with so much jealousy that they threw him into a pit and ended up selling him into slavery. Genesis 50 gives great insight into the conflict resolution Joseph had and how we should deal with conflict as well.

Recently a situation between my brother and me while vacationing together with our parents caused conflict. Hurtful words were exchanged between me and my brother, resulting in him leaving the shopping center where we were all spending time together. As soon as he left, I felt so ashamed of myself, because I was the guilty party, and was upset by the way I had treated my brother. Later in the day, we got together to talk about the conflict and try to resolve it. Thankfully, my godly parents were there to mediate. The first thing that we did was pray. We sat as a family and asked God to help us choose the right words to say. As we sat down, we talked about what had happened and the events that led up to the big blow-up in the mall. When everything was out on the table and I looked at things from my brother's point of view, I began to realize that although both of us were in the wrong, I needed to apologize. I must admit that this was very hard for me because I let pride get in the way and hated to admit that I was wrong. As soon as I apologized, I felt like a burden had been lifted from me. It was a feeling of being free. After the apologies had taken place, my mother led us in prayer and we hugged and were able to tell each other that we loved one another. I learned that day, that prayer really can work wonders and can definitely give you an attitude adjustment when it is most needed.

The things that impress me most about Joseph is the kind and caring attitude that Joseph had toward his brothers. He did not hold a grudge, and did not speak ill to them. He comforted his brothers by speaking kindly to them and telling them to humble themselves before God so they could seek Divine Forgiveness. Joseph was able to take their broken spirits and encourage them.

Conflict is a result of having relationships with one another. Relationships aren't always perfect, and are flawed. Like Joseph, we must be willing to love and forgive those we have relationships with as well as be willing to help them out in times of distress and need. Joseph's life gives us the encouragement that we need to persevere in the service of God.

—S. T.

**Humility is a prerequisite for conflict resolution.**

Humility is a prerequisite for conflict resolution. If we are unable to see the error of our own ways, then we will have a very difficult time in dealing with relationships in our lives. Joseph is a great example of humility. Of course, our perfect example of humility is Jesus.

#### **PART 4**

**FOCUS:** Genesis 50

Choosing a battle (*a.k.a. choosing to resolve a conflict*) results in communication and forgiveness. Keep the rewards of conflict resolution in mind as you take the first step to healthy conflict resolution.

**Read Genesis 50:15-21.**

We know the end of Joseph's story. Be encouraged that this type of restoration is possible in your life, too.

*Looking back on your own life, can you identify a time when God used a painful time to accomplish good? How did God bring you through this?*

**REFLECTION:** Wisely pick and choose battles of conflict in your life, because the blessings of resolution are worth the pain of the battle.

Here's one more personal reflection concerning Joseph's life.

"Life is hard. At some point in our journey, I'm confident we've all said this to ourselves. We all have our own story, our own journey we're traveling. And life IS hard at times. In Genesis 37-50 we learn about Joseph. His life was full of struggles. Many difficult things happened to him and not as a result of his own choices. He was dropped into a hole by his own brothers, sold into slavery in a foreign country, and spent several years in prison as an innocent man. Though our lives aren't often this dramatic, we all struggle. We all have conflict. How we react to conflict, how we let God shape us in the midst of it, and how we move forward from it can have a profound effect on the person we are and the person we will become.

I look at myself and feel a bit different than Joseph. His conflict was thrust upon him over and over as a result of the choices of others. As a 35-year-old wife and mother of four, my conflict, the hardest part of my journey so far, has come as a result of my own choices.

I am just beginning to learn the effects of early conflict in my life. Friend choices, dating habits, all of the relationships I nurtured in the developmental stage of me, are impacting who I am. I, unlike Joseph, didn't cling to God. I gave into my sinful nature; a nature that continuously drove me away from the peace He wanted for me. I professed a relationship with Him, but never experienced the fullness of it. I was lonely, in need of approval and attention. I reached for those things in so many wrong places not knowing the effect my choices would have many years later.

Augustine writes, "You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you." As with Joseph, God was there with me. Unlike Joseph, I was not with Him. And because of that, I futilely attempted life on my own, apart from Him. It took me almost 14 years, a scarred (but healed) marriage, and many tears to realize this. This conflict, the hardest part of my journey, has come in the middle of a 13-½ year marriage, the rearing of four sweet children, a team ministry effort, and a part-time job. What seems relevant to note is that my life, like Joseph's, didn't stop for the resolution of my conflict. Joseph and I could have curled up in a corner and cried. There was a period of about 2-3 months when that was certainly my natural response. There were moments when ignoring the people and happenings around me felt like the easier choice. Sinking into the depths of my self-loathing and depression came more naturally than moving forward in life. I wonder if Joseph felt that way when in prison? My husband, my children, my job—life—cannot be put on hold. Living in God's forgiveness and grace, striving to stay desperate for Him and never do life apart from Him again: these things are daily goals for me. As with Joseph, conflicts will continue to arise. Like Joseph, I want to meet them head on. I want to teach my children to address conflict. Because, left unresolved, it will lead to bitterness, depression, and a hardened heart. I want to nurture a Godly marriage where conflict is met with love and respect. It's in the midst of our trouble, He promises to walk with us. We *must* cling to Him. We *must* realize our own weakness and rely on Him to be our strength.

Joseph and I do share one commonality. Our outcome. God can and will use us. God can and will restore us from very low places—places of despair, loneliness, grief-- to places of peace and communion with Him. Isaiah 61:3 says, "to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified." Simply put, God takes the 'ashes' of our lives, and makes beautiful things for His glory

—C. A.





# TALK AND LISTEN

*Can you hear me now?*

## PART 1



**FOCUS:** 1 Corinthians 1:10-31

Have you ever attempted to exercise with a friend? For me, I find it practically impossible to exercise on my own. I need a friend; otherwise, I always quit the exercise routine early. I learned very early on in my attempt to exercise regularly that I needed to plan times to work out with someone. Although this has worked for me, working out with a friend brings its challenges...it is hard to talk. I am a talker, and when my heart rate increases or I am running up a hill, it is almost impossible to talk. Sometimes, the best thing to do is push through and work your muscles. But sometimes, the best thing to do is slow down and cool down. This is much like developing healthy communication skills. Sometimes it's best to talk; other times, it's best to listen.

Most of the time a conflict will not resolve without conversation. The challenge is knowing when and what to say and when and how to listen.

**Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-31.**

Apparently, conflict greatly plagued the church in Corinth. Paul noted that church members had been quarreling with each other (*v. 11*). Is there a difference between quarreling and talking? Definitely. Typically, when someone is quarreling, this person only sticks up for and sees his or her own point of view. Voice tone tends to be stern and harsh during a quarrel. Developing and refining our talking skills is a healthy and helpful exercise for resolving conflicts.

As Paul continued, he encouraged church members to be mindful of their Christian beliefs and to recognize that all wisdom is ultimately from God. This realization is humbling. God is most honored when people are unified and working together.

Do any relationships in your life sometimes seem divisive like those in the Corinthian church? If so, you are not alone. This passage from 1 Corinthians highlights challenges local churches still face today. Obviously, division can also occur in the workplace, in families, and among friends. Note that Paul did not rebuke the church for having conflicts; how they were dealing with the conflict was the problem.

Sometimes confrontation results in confession and forgiveness, but usually it first brings resistance, guilt, hurt or anger. Emotional reactions are a part of communication. You have a right to your feelings. Be prepared to process and deal with your emotions in healthy ways so that you can engage in a productive conversation. This may mean taking a break from the conversation when needed, naming your feelings in the midst of the conversation, or inviting an objective third party to the conversation to help mediate.

***Take a moment and review the 23 talking tips on the next page. Circle the items that you do well and highlight the items you need to work on the most.*** This exercise can give you some practical ways to resolve conflict better.

**REFLECTION:** Life is stressful. Think about each situation; ask God for understanding before you respond. And remember—pick and choose your battles, then talk and listen.

**Emotional reactions are a part of communication.**



- 1. Communicate lovingly, gently, honestly and effectively with patience and respect.**
- 2. Reconcile differences by compromise if the situation grants such an approach.**
- 3. Understand both sides.**
- 4. Work toward restoration and forgiveness.**
- 5. Encourage open communication.**
- 6. Be a good listener.**
- 7. Focus on things that can be changed.**
- 8. Try to keep conflict from escalating.**
- 9. Summarize frequently.**
- 10. Do not approach the situation with reluctance or timidity.**
- 11. Speak clearly and calmly.**
- 12. Make sure the distractions are minimal.**
- 13. Define what is important.**
- 14. Be specific.**
- 15. Be reasonable.**
- 16. Avoid finding fault.**
- 17. Disagreement is not always bad, but the tone must remain supportive.**
- 18. Be honest about your feelings and viewpoints.**
- 19. Do not manipulate.**
- 20. Accept the other person's feelings.**
- 21. Do not use excuses.**
- 22. Take the position of humility.**
- 23. Speak for yourself. Do not start any sentence with "You...."**



## PART 2

**FOCUS:** 1 Corinthians 13

One of the most well-known chapters in the Bible is 1 Corinthians 13. Often associated with weddings and Valentines Day, the Love Chapter is an excellent resource when a conflict arises.

**Read the chapter.** Take some time to write out from this Scripture passage what love is and what love is not.

### *Love is...*

*Examples:* Patient  
Kind

### *Love is not...*

Envious  
Boastful

*Now, think about the last time you were in a conflict and you spoke. Was your speech more reflective of love or what the Bible teaches love should not be? Be specific as you reflect on your own communication style.*

**REFLECTION:** We cannot make someone else change their words, but God affords us opportunity to change the way we engage in conversation during times of conflict or intense emotion. Ask God to begin that change within you today. Make a commitment to prepare your heart, mind and words for the next time you face a conflict and resolve to avoid the common pitfalls of damaging relationships through unloving words.

## PART 3

**FOCUS:** 2 Corinthians 10; 12:11–13:14.

Learning how to communicate well in conflict resolution is only half of the battle. Developing good listening skills is also a requirement. This part of conflict resolution is all too often forgotten.

Are you a good listener?

Here are some tips for becoming a good listener. Compare yourself to the skills listed. *How do your listening skills measure up?*

- **Make eye contact without staring.**
- **Allow time for the other person to share his/her point of view without interrupting.**
- **Maintain a relaxed posture.**
- **Avoid distracting gestures** (*shaking your leg, tapping your pen, etc.*).

**Resolution requires both good communication skills and good listening skills.**



- ☛ **Set aside your own stuff** (*preoccupations, biases, etc.*), so you can concentrate and focus on the other person.
- ☛ **Avoid judgmental expressions** (*rolling your eyes, sighing, etc.*).
- ☛ **Be observant of the person's expressions, tone of voice, etc. and react accordingly.**
- ☛ **Wait patiently through silence** (*due to tears, gaining courage, regaining composure, thinking, etc.*)

*These listening principles are also printed as a handout on p. 21.*

Many people struggle in allowing time for the other person to share his/her point of view. All too often, we are focusing on our response, rather than actually hearing what the other person is saying. Development of these listening skills assuredly yields more conflict resolution in your life. Again, humility is key.

Paul's letters provided a form of listening for the church at Corinth. Writing a letter is a great strategy for resolving conflict in our lives, too. When we write a letter, we can select our words wisely. When we receive a letter, we can *listen* by processing the information in our own time. One red flag and word of caution concerning this strategy: Avoid falling into the trap of gossip. If we spend energy discussing the conflict with others and allow unnecessary people to proofread the letter, we may make the conflict even worse.

**Read the following passages of Scripture: 2 Corinthians 10, 12:11-13:14.**

*Why was Paul so passionate?*

*Have you ever felt like Paul? Explain.*

*Have you ever needed someone to confront you (as Paul confronted members of the Corinthian church)?*

*Are you comfortable expressing yourself? What areas need work?*

*Are you a good listener? What points do you need to improve?*

**REFLECTION:** Confrontation takes courage. As you reflect on Paul's words and his example, be encouraged to fight for unity in your life. Second Corinthians 13:11 states, "...be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.." These are Christian goals, and achieving them requires both listening and talking.



**All too often in conversation, we are focusing on our response rather than actually hearing what the other person is saying.**



# FORGIVENESS

## *The path to peace and unity*

### PART 1

**FOCUS:** Philippians 4:1-9



**We can know we have forgiven someone when conflict is no longer at the forefront of our mind; or when seeing the person generates feelings of love and compassion rather than tension and anger.**

Some of my favorite memories relate to exercising with dear friends—participating in a half marathon, the Go10 Walk, or the Breast Cancer 3-Day walk with dear friends. From the excitement of the start, to the struggle and exhaustion that typically sets in, to the joy and relief of the finish line...each of these aspects of intense exercise seem sweeter and more bearable with a trusted friend. I am mindful, though, of the times when I have struggled, and a friend has held back for me. This exemplifies the gift of forgiveness. Sometimes, the relationship and togetherness are more important than pushing to make the quickest time or to prove a point. I would argue that participating in physically demanding events, like a marathon, are more about the journey, not the finishing time. The same is true of forgiveness. The relationship, the journey, the process is most important. And a conflict cannot truly be resolved without forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a characteristic of God. The gospel is based on man's need for forgiveness. The cross is an example of forgiveness. One of the themes of Scripture is forgiveness. Do you see the point? Forgiveness jumps off the pages of Scripture in many ways. As Christians, we have opportunity and responsibility to honor God by asking forgiveness when we fail and extending forgiveness when others fail. This is the final step of conflict resolution. Forgive.

What does it mean to forgive? Forgiveness is a process and an act that results in no longer punishing someone for a wrong. Essentially, we know we have forgiven someone when the conflict is no longer in the forefront of our mind as we see the person and when the feelings of tension and anger have turned into compassion and love. Now don't get me wrong. Not everyone is singing "Kumbaya" at the point of restoration. A relationship may still require time to repair and heal. And sometimes, relationships are never fully restored. We may have to ask forgiveness or forgive someone multiple times. But this does not remove the need for forgiveness. Forgiveness is often the catalyst for healing.

#### **Read Philippians 4:1-9.**

Did you catch the conflict alluded to in these verses of encouragement? Apparently, Euodia and Syntyche were in conflict with each other and it was known in the community. They needed help. A lack of forgiveness (a.k.a. ongoing conflict) reflects negatively on a person's spiritual growth and maturity. Paul provided the solution to their conflict. He challenged them to think on things of God and accept the support and help from fellow believers. The mature Christian's thought life cannot be consumed with bitter thoughts of unforgiveness.

***Take a moment and list the qualities Paul emphasized in Philippians 4:8. Then, beside each one record an example of each of these traits in your life.***

*EXAMPLE:*

*Honorable*—I gave back extra change the cashier accidentally and unknowingly gave me.



Taking note of personal “Fruit of the Spirit” qualities is one way to focus your thoughts on the goodness of God. Taking time to think about these traits displayed in the lives of others, or thinking about how these traits are part of God’s natural character can also prove beneficial.

**REFLECTION:** How do you “think on these things” in your life? If you spend most of your time thinking about what others are not doing or how bad of a person you are, then you will never fully experience God’s plan for your life. Also, do you see how an unresolved conflict can greatly hinder your Christian walk?

## **PART 2**

**FOCUS:** 2 Corinthians 2: 5-11

**Read 2 Corinthians 2: 5-11 As we continue our study of conflict resolution and emphasize the need for forgiveness .**

Forgiveness has healing power. Paul put the need for forgiveness in the context of community. Have you ever seen a conflict explode? Typically, it starts between two people, then other people start to fight and take sides, and before we know it, World War III erupts. The sad reality is, this phenomenon happens in families and in churches all of the time. Paul challenged the church in Corinth to resist the opportunity to cause pain (v. 5) and to comfort each other, which accompanies forgiveness (v. 7). Christ the ultimate comforter and forgiver modeled this challenge. When we experience restoration, Satan loses his foothold (v. 11). Consider this; when we are unwilling to forgive, and conflict continues or escalates, we essentially fall prey to a tactic of the devil to keep us from growing in our Christian lives. Forgiveness and conflict resolution are that serious.

**Ongoing conflict and growth as a Christian are incompatible.**

**When we experience restoration, Satan loses his foothold.**

**When we are unwilling to forgive, we fall prey to the devil’s ploys.**

***What does it feel like to forgive? To be forgiven?***

***Why do people struggle to forgive?***



*What if the person doesn't ask for forgiveness?*

*What if the person dies or is unavailable?*



**REFLECTION:** Please discuss your responses to these questions with a friend. Most of these questions yield no easy answers—especially the last question. But, exploring your thoughts about this important topic in the safety of friendship is a great place to begin the process of forgiveness.

### **PART 3**

**FOCUS:** Psalm 133

Hopefully, by this point in the study, you've gained a sense of insight into our own personal conflict resolution style. Most of all, I pray you have been encouraged to strive toward nurturing healthy relationships in your life.

*Looking back through the study, what lessons or principles about conflict resolution resonate with you?*

*Why are conflict resolution skills vitally important in the life of a Christian?*

The following page contains a list of nine hindrances to good interpersonal relationships. Each of these breeds conflict and counters a command of God. Read through these now and ponder their influence in your life.

*Do you struggle with any of these? If so, honestly list any problem areas below.*

**“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3).**

Prayerfully make a commitment to work on these struggles. If you do, both you and those around you will experience and enjoy the gifts God designed for life in community.

**Read Psalm 133.**

The psalmist issued the challenge to dwell in unity. Remember, resolution is a journey and a process. Maybe that's why Paul's plea for unity in Ephesians 4:1-3 alludes to walking.

Mark Twain once said of forgiveness, “Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.” His poetic perspective reminds us that forgiveness may be painful, but the result is always beautiful.

# Nine Hindrances\*



**\*to good interpersonal relationships**

1. Self-centeredness
2. Non-forgiving attitude
3. Hypercritical/judgmental spirit
4. Insecurity(easily threatened)
5. Reluctancy to trust
6. Prejudice
7. Unwillingness to open up
8. Failure to recognize individual differences
9. Inability to let some things go



## Tips for Better Listening

- ✦ Make eye contact without staring.
- ✦ Allow the other person to share his/her point of view without interrupting.
- ✦ Maintain a relaxed posture.
- ✦ Avoid distracting gestures (*shaking your leg, tapping your pen, etc.*).
- ✦ Set aside your own stuff (*preoccupations, biases, etc.*), so you can concentrate and focus on the other person.
- ✦ Avoid judgmental expressions (*rolling eyes, sighing, etc.*).
- ✦ Be observant; note expressions and tone of voice and react accordingly.
- ✦ Wait patiently through silence (*valuable for gaining courage, regaining composure, dealing with tears, thinking, etc.*).

