

Managing Conflict in the

Tunnel of Chaos

The Jesus Model and Mandate for Biblical Conflict Resolution and Conciliation

By Kelly A. Bennett, Esq.

Living with unresolved conflict is an uncomfortable place, because we are not called to a life of chaos, but to a life of purpose: “You, Lord, give perfect peace to those who keep their purpose firm and put their trust in you.”¹

Yet conflict is an opportunity for enormous transformation. Rick Warren said, “In fact, the tunnel of conflict is the passageway to intimacy in any relationship. Until you care enough to confront and resolve the underlying barriers, you will never grow close to each other.”²

Jesus both modeled and mandated conflict resolution and reconciliation. But there’s a prerequisite. It’s in Hebrews 11:6, “Without faith, it is impossible to please God.” Look at Noah’s example: “Noah was a pleasure to the Lord.”³ “By faith, Noah built a ship in the middle of dry land. He was warned about something he couldn’t see and acted on what he was told. ... As a result, Noah became intimate with God.”⁴

The Model: Jesus

When offended, Jesus’ responses were righteous, but sometimes surprising:

■ **Confrontation/Creating Conflict.** When dining at the home of a Pharisee, Jesus was criticized for not performing the ceremonial washing. In response, Jesus confronted the Pharisees on their motives and priorities. Jesus also repeatedly said, “How terrible it will be for you Pharisees!” referring to the sad state of their hearts.⁵ Jesus spoke truth in love.

■ **Grace and Forgiveness.** Remember the woman caught in adultery that was to be stoned by the Pharisees? When the

crowd disbursed, Jesus asked, “Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?” “No, Lord,” she said. And Jesus said, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”⁶ Then there was the ultimate model of grace and forgiveness: Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.

■ **Withdrawal/Avoidance.** While teaching in Nazareth, Jesus was confronted by an angry mob. Jesus declined to perform miracles in his hometown of Nazareth. The furious crowd tried to push him off the edge of a cliff. Did Jesus rebuke them? No, in the face of murderous rage, Jesus “slipped away through the crowd and left them.”⁷ A time of withdrawal was appropriate.

■ **Adding Value.** John Maxwell often says his goal is to “add value to people.” That’s what Jesus modeled. A common response to offenders is to retaliate and remove value. But what if, in the face of conflict we ask, “How do I add value to this person?” Jesus says to love them, do good and pray for their happiness, be kind and show them compassion, don’t judge or criticize, but forgive them.⁸

The Mandate: Resolve and Reconcile

Acting on the mandate is hard work, yet transforming. Here’s a look at the components:

■ **Before confronting anyone else, examine yourself and own your part.** Having mediated over 500 disputes, I’ve not seen a case where one side contributed *nothing* to the problem. Jesus commands, “...why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own? ... First get rid of the log from your own eye ...”⁹

King David did this and Jesus reinforced it: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me ..."10 When the Pharisees wanted to stone the adulteress woman to death, Jesus said "let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

As the accusers examined their own hearts, they quietly slipped away.11 The mandate for self-examination put the "offended" on a very different path!

■ **Regardless of whether you are the offender or the offended, make the first move without delay.** If you are the *offender*, Jesus says: "If you enter your place of worship and ... you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God."12

Unresolved sin is like a renegade cancer that is growing out of control. God wants it taken care of right away.

If you are the *offended*, Jesus directs you to not ignore it, but to go directly to the offender and work it out. If he won't listen, go again with one or two other believers, and if it's still unresolved, tell the church.13 Again, we are told to take the initiative, even if we are the one wounded. Get up, get going, and get it resolved.

■ **Forgive, as many times as it takes.** Consider how Jesus taught us to pray, "... forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us. ... If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins."14

Peter lamented, "Well how many times do I have to forgive?" Jesus said it doesn't matter how many times someone sins against us. If they ask our forgiveness, we are never to withhold it.15 Pain is released through forgiveness. But it requires something: An attitude of gratitude and trusting God.

Jesus likened the Kingdom of God to the story of an ungrateful servant who had borrowed millions of dollars from the King. Mr. Ungrateful couldn't repay, begged for mercy, and the King forgave the enormous debt.

Mr. Ungrateful then demanded a fel-

low servant repay a few thousand dollars he owed. Mr. Ungrateful showed no mercy, and had the servant jailed. The King heard about it and became infuriated. Mr. Ungrateful was sent to prison "until he had paid every last penny."

Jesus said, "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters in your heart."16

The Ungrateful Servant was two faced. How unforgivable can sin against us be, in comparison to the debt the King of Kings paid *for us*?

■ **Don't just resolve it, be reconciled.** God calls us to "do our part" and seek reconciliation.17 What does that mean? God reconciled the world to himself, describing it as "Not counting men's sin against them."18 Jesus described it as "Com[ing] to terms quickly with your enemy."19

Author John Lynch writes: "Reconciliation belongs to a completely different stratosphere than mere conflict resolution. ... When we are willing to say, 'Will you forgive me because I did ___?' we create the opportunity for people to forgive us and sometimes even come back into heart relationship with us. ... Have you noticed that people don't get fixed or stay fixed when we try to force it? Grace always invites rather than demands reconciliation. An apology ... won't heal the relationship. Remember—that's what forgiveness always seeks. Jesus paid with his life to bring us reconciliation. This is sacred ground."20

The Reason for the Mandate

Our relationships are our collective witness to the world. Jesus said when we love each other as he loves us, it proves to the world that we are his followers.21 In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed that we would be unified with each other and in God, so that "*the world will know that you sent me and will understand that you love them as much as you love me.*"22

Jesus mandates resolution and reconciliation, because the relationships God gives us are gifts! How will you answer the question, "*What did you do with what I gave you?*" Will we treasure our relationships, or trash them? Who

do you need to treasure today?

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¹ Isaiah 26:3 (TEV)

² Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on earth am I here for?* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2002), 147.

³ Genesis 6:8 (LB)

⁴ Hebrews 11:7 (Message)

⁵ Luke 11:37-52 (NLT)

⁶ John 8:10-11 (NLT)

⁷ Luke 4:23-30 (NLT)

⁸ Luke 6:27-38 (NLT)

⁹ Luke 6:41-42 (NLT)

¹⁰ Psalm 139:23-24 (NAS)

¹¹ John 8:1-11 (NLT)

¹² Matthew 5:24 (Message)

¹³ Matthew 18:15-17 (NLT)

¹⁴ Matthew 6:9-15 (NLT)

¹⁵ Luke 17:3-4 (NLT)

¹⁶ Matthew 18:21-35 (NLT)

¹⁷ Romans 12:18

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 (NIV)

¹⁹ Matthew 5:23-25

²⁰ Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, John Lynch, *TrueFaced: Trust God and others with who you really are.* (Colorado: NavPress 2004), 126, 127.

²¹ John 13:34-35 (NLT)

²² John 17:20-23 (NLT)

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