I WILL NEVER FORGET my conversation with Mary. It happened about five or six years into my pastoral career. I was asked to visit this lady who had been a faithful and involved church member for many years, but had mysteriously dropped out—and stayed out. I determined to find out why and help her with re-entry. As far as I know, I failed.

It was not my first visit with Mary, but it would turn out to be a pivotal one, perhaps more for me than her. After exchanging pleasantries, I decided to probe the issue of her abandonment of the church. In the end, she didn’t reveal all the details. Rather, she confirmed that during a church remodeling project, a considerable storm had developed over, in her words, “a gallon of paint.”

In retrospect, she may have told me more than I heard, but after her revelation about the heart of the storm, I heard little else for a few moments. Then I tried my best to address the issues of human stubbornness, bitterness, and the power of forgiveness. “Why let another retain such power over you?” I said. “Who wants to miss heaven over a gallon of paint?” You may challenge my theological framework, but I was astonished—a gallon of paint!

Does it seem that sometimes the casualties of conflict are greater than the cause for the conflict? Nevertheless, we know that everywhere we turn, conflict can be found—or it finds us.
What Is Conflict?

Simply put, conflict is differences colliding. The nature and damage of the collision depend on a lot of things, and that’s where the Bible speaks to us in a host of healthy ways. You will be reading about them throughout this book.

The biblical writer James has a startling perspective on interpersonal conflict. In essence, he says that such conflict is a result of conflicting desires within us. These desires erupt into quarrels and clashes when we do not get what we want or want what others have. We will do about anything to have it or take it. Selfish motives dominate—and they destroy (see James 4:1-3).

Ironically, what we really need could have been better supplied through prayer.

Conflict occurs in courtrooms and classrooms and bedrooms. Our differences collide over theology, philosophy, psychology, and personality. We feud over issues of race, religion, and even recreation.

There is conflict in the animal kingdom, the human kingdom, and even the cosmos itself. Conflict is raging, at any given moment, on the ground, in the air, under ground, and beneath the sea, in some form or another. Our struggles are within and between. Conflict is a daily event, whether in community schoolyard scrapes or corporate skyscrapers. It happens at Madison Square Garden, over lawns and gardens, and even in the Garden of Eden.

The fact is, conflict can occur even in a perfect world. The Bible describes that early abode of Adam and Eve. The serpent first created a mental conflict about God by planting seeds of doubt in Eve’s mind. Those seeds grew and led to choices of behavior that were disobedient to God’s command. When God confronted them, everyone began blaming each other for what had happened. Adam and Eve probably had some additional, private words for each other that didn’t get recorded in the Bible.
The discipline for their actions was a more conflicted relationship with the serpent and even nature itself. Before long, even the first siblings became rivals, and one killed the other. Things got worse, much worse. It finally caught up with humanity in the form of a cleansing flood (see Genesis 6).

Our story since then has been continual conflict. The history of civilization reveals that it hasn’t been a very civil history. Unfortunately, even the history of Christianity has been littered with enough rivalry, bigotry, and even brutality to cause the most faithful to groan and wonder why.

In light of all the tensions that exist, one of the reasons for a reflective visit to a cemetery is to recall that all arguments are eventually laid to rest.

**Levels of Conflict**

Conflict has many faces, natures, and levels. Some parts are quite harmless and a normal part of problem-solving. Other aspects can become devastating. Let’s look at brief descriptions of four levels of conflict.

1. **Problem-solving** is a mild level of conflict, where we compare and contrast ideas or methods, such as corporate strategies or selecting a college to attend. This level engages discussion and seeks solutions. It can get a bit heated, but ideally remains pretty calm.

2. **Disagreement** may lead from the first level. Many underlying reasons bring us into disagreement, such as differences in temperament, traditions, family background, perspective, underlying agendas, or expectations. Debate and tension are common at this level, and emotions may flare.

   Often, as disagreement becomes more intense, those involved are tempted to build superhighways that take them from basic disagreement to all-out conflict. Some of these fast roads are sarcasm, personal insults, character attacks, exaggerated accusations of blame, and so on. These are some of the conflict dangers in marriage, as well as in other forums of life.
3. Contest is the level of conflict where it seems that the objective becomes winning at any cost. Tactics become more unpleasant. The original issue and its solution fade in importance and winning becomes the only goal. Usually, all parties lose.

4. Relational warfare is the most unfortunate degree of conflict. At this level, deep divisions occur as insults fly and the attacks become more brutal—even to the point of injury in some way (such as, damaging a reputation or inflicting emotional abuse). All manner of heartache and destruction occur as a result of this kind of warfare.

If we are aware of these various levels, it helps us to know what is normal, what to expect, and how to avoid escalation of conflict. Resolution is always easier at the earlier levels, before major devastation occurs. When we sense the tension rising, we need to take appropriate action without delay.

**Conflict’s Positive Side**

Conflict is an invitation to discover win-win solutions. It offers a chance to clarify our expectations, uncover our assumptions, and bring light to misunderstandings. Conflict should prod us to evaluate situations, relationships, and even our personal motives and attitudes. It is a terrific opportunity for reconciliation and renewal. For sure, it tends to energize some people and depress others. Yet, hopefully, it gets us off dead center and opens up dialogue. It can spark creativity, and bring people together to pray and counsel and console.

Amazingly, it can be a pathway to holiness! The context of Matthew 5:48, regarding being complete (perfect) like our Heavenly Father, is the context of love, and further, loving our enemies!

**Four Responses to Conflict**

What can we learn from Christ and the Bible about dealing with conflict? There are four basic responses to conflict: avoid it, resolve it, manage it, or yield to it.
1. **Avoid it.** Of course, there are the more popular, though less honorable ways to avoid conflict, such as the “I don’t want to get involved” excuse. Sometimes that line is valid, but often it is a reflection of failure to care enough or a failure of courage.

   It helps to avoid conflict if you can **anticipate it.** As a fighter once said, “It is the punch that you don’t see coming that knocks you out.”

   The half-brother of Jesus reminds us, “We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man” (James 3:2). The context of that verse is the use of the tongue, and the amazing “forest fires” that we can set with it. He is essentially telling us that in many ways we all offend. Therefore, learn to expect it, and plan how to avoid conflict or minimize the potential of offenses committed.

   Over the years, this verse has taught me to build a “bumper zone” around everyone. In other words, I assume that sooner or later most anyone I know will do or say something that offends me. That is, they will “bump” into me. So I am not shocked when it happens and try not to react inappropriately. I attempt to be prepared to handle things with grace and care to preserve the relationship. Only recently, much to my chagrin, it became evident that others, too, have a “bumper zone” around me. Words I spoke were misquoted to others, and offense set in. On my part, silence would have been the better route in the first place.

   It is probably true that the massive volume of opinions, judgments, criticisms, sarcasms, and those “don’t tell anyone, but . . .” statements that we utter daily cause plenty of conflict and damaged relationships in our worlds.

   Jesus admonished, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged” (Matthew 7:1). In one of the most convicting statements in Scripture, Jesus warned that we will give account for every careless word we speak. “I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be
acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:36-37).

Possibly the best written advice regarding the tongue and avoiding conflict is, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29, emphasis added).

That is how we avoid a lot of conflict in life, and how we build powerful and lasting relationships!

Avoiding conflict, however, is not the highest value we are discussing in this chapter. Even Jesus, on numerous occasions, invited conflict. Even a casual reading of the Gospels will reveal that He said and did things against the religious sensitivities of His day that He knew would incite criticism and wrath. So, too, there are those times in life when we believe that the cause is worth it, and choose to speak or act with purpose and awareness of the reactions and consequences.

We are wise to understand human nature and the specific tendencies and patterns of the folks we relate to on a regular basis. On the basis of our knowledge, we can prepare how to react and respond when something is said or done that otherwise would lead to conflict if we had not anticipated it.

The apostle Paul gave us a sound example when he said, “I have fought the good fight” (2 Timothy 4:7). That line has many lessons in it, but one of them is choose our fights. Many hassles in life are not “good” fights; they are not worth it. So, avoid them. Save energy for worthy engagements and causes.

The writer of Proverbs gave us good counsel when he advised that a gentle answer deflects wrath (see Proverbs 15:1).

2. Resolve it. This is the best-case scenario, once conflict has become a reality. Resolving conflict is the discovery of a solution for the conflict and those embroiled in it. The instruction Jesus gave His disciples on prayer was brief, yet had a focus on resolution: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).
One of the most powerful and effective lessons my wife and I have learned about resolving conflict is to distinguish between the issues of conflict and the injuries of conflict. They are two very different things. We desperately need to realize that we can live with differences, but we can’t live well with the damage they can cause.

Once again, it is the Word that instructs us. One brief verse in Ephesians says it so well. “In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (4:26). Wow! Let’s take a look at what is packed into this dynamite statement.

First, it takes Christians off the hook (a little) about anger, by assuming that it occurs. Then, it challenges us about what we do with our anger (“Do not sin”). It is not the emotion of anger itself that is wrong, but what we do with it determines what it becomes. So, in times of conflict, this verse is telling us we must deal with the volatile emotion of anger and hostile feelings.

“But,” you may say, “what about when we get into a difference of opinion that escalates into an argument, and it is time to turn out the lights and go home, yet the conflict is not resolved?” Great question, and a very common dilemma.

Most people assume that we should just “sleep on it” and it will go away. Wrong! Suppressed anger and conflict have a way of showing up later in a variety of forms. The tensions simmer, and unresolved emotional conflict can lead to resentment, which can inflict long-term damage on relationships.

So, what kind of hint is in this verse that resolution is needed? The words about not letting the sun set while we are still angry is the word of admonition to reconcile. “But,” you might be thinking, “what if the disagreement is real and unresolved?” Good question. However, God’s Word is addressing the emotion (anger), not the issue.

This insightful instruction calls for us to resolve the emotional separation and damage, whether or not the issue is
still under debate. The fact is, humans can get along with many differences of opinion, as long as we keep resolving the feelings that can come between us. This happens as one party has the grace and courage to confess his or her part in the tension and ask forgiveness. If all parties involved do the same, resolution can occur, and everyone can live to dialogue another day.

In a brilliant insight on the purpose and power of worship, Jesus told us that if we are in the midst of worship and realize we have offended another, we should leave and resolve the issue—as a continuing act of our worship (see Matthew 5:23-24).

Another set of activities that leads to resolution is summarized by using the words “resolve conflict” as an acrostic:

- **R**ecognize the need
- **E**ngage in dialogue
- **S**tick with the issue
- **O**verlook sidetracking tendencies
- **L**earn to love, even during conflict
- **V**iew the issue from the other’s perspective
- **E**xplore options
- **C**larify the issues
- **O**pen your mind
- **N**ever say “never” or “always”
- **F**ocus on core issues
- **L**isten for feelings
- **I**magine yourself in the other’s place
- **C**ompromise can be win-win
- **T**iming is vital

3. **Manage it.** There are times when the essence of the conflict continues. In those situations, the negative consequences can be minimized if the conflict is managed well and wisely.

Legal systems use mediators for corporate clashes, marriage problems, and a host of conflict issues. Towns and
cities appoint mediating teams to address escalating issues that have potential for increasing hostility. Negotiators are involved in everything from hostage situations to sports contracts. All are intending to serve, literally, as agents of conflict management and resolution.

Conflict is best managed when people on differing sides agree to some guidelines and ground rules for addressing the dispute. Such guidelines may be:

- Stick to the issue
- No character attacks
- Own your feelings, rather than blame others for them
- Avoid building highways that lead to hostilities

Conflict is better managed as involved parties work to discover the issues, keeping in mind that the surface issue is not always the most significant issue.

The words and behaviors given to us in Ephesians 4:25-32 are an absolute treasure of wisdom for not only managing, but avoiding and resolving conflict. As we take time to read and ponder these verses, we can identify and reflect on the various parts of the counsel given, and even ask God’s Spirit to help us with ones that fit present needs.

The entirety of Matthew 5, which is a portion of Jesus’ words that we refer to as the Sermon on the Mount, is loaded with wisdom that can help us avoid, and even transform conflict.

4. Yield to it. This may sound like a strange response to conflict, but it has its own value and power. Jesus referred to a form of such yielding when He told us that we are blessed when we are reviled and misused for God’s sake. He said to rejoice and be glad because of the reward that awaits us, and that we are neither the first nor the last who suffer for the faith (see Matthew 5:11-12).

A bit later in the same sermon, Jesus said that there is a time to not resist one who abuses us for the faith (see vv. 38-42). Absorb the abuse and come back for more, as it were. Before this is misunderstood, let me hasten to add that the
context of these statements is persecution for our faith. This is not addressing a marriage or parenting situation nor criminal acts or nations attacking nations.

The ultimate example of yielding to conflict is Jesus Christ and His death on the Cross. Could He have avoided it? We believe so. Could He have counterattacked? Certainly, but He did not. His follower Peter had lucid recollections of Jesus yielding to the attacks on His honor and life. About those memories, he said, “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23). Peter prefaced this revelation by admonishing us to “follow in [Christ’s] steps” (v. 21).

Conflict Is Everywhere

In summary, conflict is all around us, and often within us. Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). That is essentially the Christian creed as it relates to conflict and peace. However, as the verse recognizes, it is not always possible to avoid it. So, we must recognize our personal responsibility, to avoid conflict when possible and to address it when it arises. And we must exercise grace to help resolve emotional conflict, even though differences exist. Through confession, forgiveness, and discovery of solution, we must reconcile when possible.

Actually, it is a wonderful thing to realize that the essence of the gospel is about bringing ultimate solution to irresolvable conflict, through the grace of God as well as the intercession and reconciliation made possible by Christ. As the apostle Paul said, “God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation... has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

Fight the good fight, finish the course, and keep the faith!
Scriptures Cited: Genesis 6; Proverbs 15:1; Matthew 5:11-12, 23-24, 38-42; 6:12; 7:1; 12:36-37; Romans 12:18; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19; Ephesians 4:25-32; 2 Timothy 4:7; James 3:2; 4:1-3; 1 Peter 2:21, 23

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