

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, July 8, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MARK 3:25

“If a family divides itself into groups which fight each other, that family will fall apart” (Good News).

“A home filled with strife and division destroys itself” (Living Bible).

STRENGTHENING YOUR FAMILY
(2) HOW TO RESTORE HARMONY IN YOUR HOME

Families are fragile, and conflict can damage and even destroy them. I think it ought to be a mandatory requirement that a couple be taught conflict management before marriage, because we go into marriage sometimes totally blind! How many of you, before you got married, were taught how to fight fair? Conflict is inevitable because every individual is unique. We have different interests, tastes, talents, abilities and temperament, so we're going to clash because we are different and we look at life differently.

Today I would like you to look at three things:

1. The Reason for conflict,
2. The Reactions to conflict, and
3. The Resolution to conflict.

1. The Reason for Conflict. What causes it? The Bible is very blunt. It says there is one reason for it. Look at James 4:1,2: “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but you don't get it.” That is to say -- the cause of conflict is competing desires. I want what I want; you want what you want.

How many of you at home have an electric blanket? How many of you have single control on that electric blanket? It's a dumb idea, isn't it?! We're made with different body temperatures. Some like it hot; some like it lukewarm. We're all different, and as we go along in marriage, conflict becomes inevitable.

Someone has said that many marriages go through three stages:

Stage 1 - the happy honeymoon

Stage 2 - the party's over

Stage 3 — let's make a deal!

2. **The Reactions to Conflict.** How do you normally react to conflict? Usually in one of five ways:

a. My way - and my way says, "I win." I assert my will until you give in. I'm totally right; you're totally wrong; and my way is the only way. You fight, and you just keep going till you win.

b. No way - "no way" says, "I withdraw; I back away from the conflict. I ignore the problem at all costs." So nothing is ever resolved because I just keep walking away from conflict.

c. Your way — and "your way" is when I give in and roll over and play dead. I want your approval, so I pretend I'm a door mat. I always give in to your wishes. It's always "your way." It's a very peaceful way to live but also a very frustrating way, and one that can produce a dandy stomach ulcer!

d. Half way - and that is where you compromise. I give in a little; you give in a little. You win some, you lose some. And that's better than the first three. But there's an even better way -

e. Our way - when we work out mutual goals together. I'm concerned not only about solving the problem; I care about the relationship, and I care about you. So, I want us to have a mutually satisfactory resolution to this conflict because you are important to me, and our relationship is important.

3. **The Resolution to Conflict.** Let us turn to the Bible and see eight steps on how to resolve conflict successfully.

a. Become a Christian. That's the starting point. Commit your life to Christ. You can't have peace with other people until you first have peace with God. The Bible says that if I have not committed my life to Christ, I am at war with God. I'm doing my own thing. And if I'm in conflict with God vertically, it spills over horizontally. Many family problems would be solved if members of the family would just kneel at the foot of the Cross and make Christ Lord of all. Then there would be harmony and unity.

Look at Ephesians 2:16: "As parts of the same Body, our anger against each other has disappeared, for both of us have been reconciled to God. And so the conflict has ended at the Cross." What a great verse! When Christ's Spirit is living in me and Christ's Spirit is living in you, Jesus is not going to fight with Jesus!

Many of you could say, "Before I became a Christian, I had no motivation at all to resolve conflict. If there was a conflict, I'd simply say, "That's your problem." But now that I have the Holy Spirit in my life, He not only gives me the desire to make things right when there's a strained relationship, but He gives me the power to make things right."

b. Talk to God about the conflict. Before you talk to the person you're upset with, talk to God about the conflict. Pray about it, and admit it to Him, and you may end up solving it right there.

James 4:2 is a very revealing verse. See what it says, "You quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God." Ask God! Many of the conflicts we have in life occur when we expect other people to meet needs that God expects Himself to meet. Many a time we look to other people for help, and all the time God is saying, "Why don't you ask Me?"

I've heard people say, "If only I could get married, all my needs would be met." But folks, no matter how wonderful that person would be, he or she could never meet all your needs. Just look at Donald Trump, for example. God designed you in such a way that He wants to meet your deepest needs. Look to God to meet your basic needs.

c. Analyze the Problem, and ask yourself, "How much of this is my fault?" Before you go out accusing and blaming and attacking, Jesus says, "Check your own score." Am I the problem? Am I the cause of it? Is there a blind spot in my life?

Look at Matthew 7:3: "Why, then, do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, and pay no attention to the log in your own eye?... Take the log out of your own eye first, and then you will be able to see and take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Good News).

When you're in conflict, before you start getting the sawdust out of your wife's eye, get the telephone pole out of your eye! Am I being demanding? Am I being unrealistic? Am I oversensitive, insensitive, or impatient?

A friend of mine had a big blowup with his wife because she always had Dial soap in the shower, and he liked change. He didn't like the same smell all the time! Why not get Safeguard and Lifebuoy and Irish Spring once in a while? And he made a big fuss. But fortunately, he saw how foolish he was being, and they made up. But the next Christmas he opened one of his presents from his wife, and there were 27 different bars of soap! Now that was a wife who cares!

Look at yourself and say, "Am I the problem?" There's no such thing as a one-person-problem. It is always a family problem; it's our problem. 1 John 1:8 says, "If we say we have no sin, we're only deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Just be honest. We all do dumb things. So analyze the problem.

d. Schedule a peace conference. Sit down and face the issues. Tackle the problem head on. Conflict is seldom resolved accidentally. It is resolved deliberately. Don't be the artful dodger! The only way to resolve conflict is to face it. You've got to talk it out.

Notice what Jesus says in this connection; He's talking about going to Church, and the priority of getting things right with other people before you get down to worship. Matthew 5:23,24: "If... you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift in front of the altar, and go at once to make peace with your brother, then come back and offer your

gift to God” (GN). You can’t worship or do anything else effectively with unresolved conflict. But note well two things:

(1) Choose the right time for the conference. Timing is everything for conflict resolution. Don’t drop a bomb on your spouse! Sometimes a wife who has been in the home all day, meets her husband at the door at 5:30 p.m. and just opens the flood gates! That’s bad timing. Now some of you may be morning people, and others night people; and do you know something -- morning people usually marry night people! Opposites attract. So you need to find a time that is best for both of you to have this conference. The best time to deal with an issue is when you’re both at your best; so choose the right time by mutual consent.

(2) Choose the right place for the conference - a neutral place, preferably, away from the children and the telephone. And, for any sake, don’t argue in bed! And then you both pray, and you come with a spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness, ready to work on the issue, not attacking each other, but attacking the problem. We’re on the same team. We’re not fixing the blame but attacking the problem. There’s going to be some resolution, and there’s going to be no accusing or excusing.

e. Establish Ground Rules - prior to the confrontation!

Not too long ago the United States Senate approved the INF treaty with the Soviet Union, entailing a drastic arms cut on the part of both super powers. Have we therefore resolved all our conflict with the Soviets? No way. We are still in major disagreement over our political philosophies - Communism and Democracy. Those difference may be irreconcilable. But even though we disagree with them, we can agree that there are certain weapons that we will not use.

Now an INF treaty needs to be signed in every family so that when we argue, we can have major differences, but there are certain deadly weapons that are out of bounds, and we will not use them because they provoke to anger and resentment.

Here are seven rules for fighting fair in marriage. They all start with “C” so you can call them “the Seven C’s”! Now we’ve all done these things, so don’t let me see any of you give each other the elbow as I mention them! Determine in your heart that from this day forward, these are all out of bounds.

(1) Never compare. Don’t say, “Why can’t you be like so and so?”; or, “You’re just like your father or mother”; or, “I wish you could make an apple pie like my mother.” It’s unfair to compare.

(2) Never condemn. Don’t use phrases like “You always...”, “You never...”, “You ought to...”, “You ought to be ashamed of yourself!” You see, when you lay on the guilt, there will always be an angry response, always. Only God has the right to judge.

(3) Never command. Don’t try to end an argument by force. “I demand that you do what I say, or else...” Don’t try to be a parent to your spouse.

(4) Never challenge. Don't make threats like "Just try that and see what happens." Don't fling down the gauntlet or you may be very startled by a belligerent response! Never threaten withdrawal of sex or money, and never threaten divorce. Rule those out as deadly weapons in your marriage.

(5) Never condescend. Never treat people as less than they really are. Don't belittle your spouse. Don't put them down, or ridicule them, or deliberately hurt their feelings. And above all, don't play psychologist! "Now I know why you said that." "Oh, really!" "Yes, you said that because..." Folks, most of us have a difficult enough time figuring out our own motives! Don't prejudge motives.

(6) Never contradict. Don't interrupt your spouse in the middle of a sentence. We're so inclined to rush in, say things back, and seek to justify our own position. Often, we don't even listen; we're just thinking of what we're going to say back! Don't cut people off. Wait your turn to speak when you're in a conflict. Treat each other with consideration.

(7) Never confuse. Don't bring up unrelated issues in the middle of an argument! Often, we do this intentionally to sidetrack people, and some of us are very good at this, especially when we see that we're getting killed! Stick with the issue.

Let me summarize by saying: Attack the issue, not each other. I like Proverbs 11:29 (LB) which says, "The fool who provokes his family to anger and resentment will finally have nothing worthwhile left." That is to say, it is foolish intentionally to cause anger or resentment in your home. It's plain dumb, but we do it so often when we're angry. Because we know each other so well, we know the buttons to press, the thing that will tick off your husband, or what will send your wife into orbit!

f. Switch your Focus. Move the focus away from yourself to the other person. Graduate from selfishness to unselfishness. Philippians 2:4,5 says, "Each of you should look out not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." If we would only obey these verses we would have very little conflict in our homes.

What was Christ's attitude? It was an attitude of not looking after Number One but looking out for other people. Notice that word "look." In the Greek, it is the verb "skopeo" from which we get our word telescope, or microscope, or the scope on a rifle. It means to "look intently," to pay attention to the needs of the person you're in conflict with.

So you have to ask -- what are my spouse's needs right now? What can I do to meet those needs? When we're angry, all we can see are our needs, our hurts, our expectations that haven't been met. And the Bible says, "Look at the needs of others." Why not say to your spouse, "I'm sorry; I was only thinking of myself." When you say that, and your wife comes out of her swoon, then you can begin to deal with the real issues! But when two immature people both want their own way, conflict is inevitable, and we just need to grow up.

g. Ask for Advice. If you're not making progress, even after several "peace

conferences,” and your home life is deteriorating, get some help. In every other area of life, we’re not ashamed to ask a professional for help. We go to a doctor, a lawyer, a CPA. So we need the Christian counsel of a pastor, or a Christian psychologist trained in family therapy, when relationships remain strained.

Some people are more interested in pretending they have a successful marriage than they are in having a good marriage. And if you hide behind that mask, and project that cool exterior, giving the impression that everything’s just fine, who do you think you’re kidding? You’re certainly not fooling God, and you’re not fooling your own family.

It takes courage, a love for your family, and real maturity to seek counseling. If your spouse won’t go with you, go yourself. At least you can get help in maturing spiritually. Proverbs 15:12 (GN) says, “Conceited people do not like to be corrected. They never ask for advice from those who are wiser.” And verse 32 of that same chapter says, “If you refuse to learn, you are hurting yourself.”

h. Don’t give up. Don’t walk out in the middle of a fight! Stick with it. Resolve your problems. Conflict resolution is never easy.

There are three stages in any conflict:

- (1) Recognition — it goes like this -- “We have a problem.”
- (2) Reaction - that’s when you say -- “It’s worse than I thought,” and that’s the painful stage, when voices are raised and there are falling tears, and bitterness and anger come out.
- (3) Resolution -- and that’s when you say, “What are we going to do about it?”

Unfortunately, many families never get past stage two. You’ve got to stick with it and never walk away from your problem. Let me tell you something very important -- it is far more rewarding to resolve a conflict than to dissolve a relationship. And you’ll do one or the other -- you’ll resolve or dissolve. Make a commitment that together you will do whatever it takes to make this thing work. Galatians 6:9 says, “Let us not grow weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest, if we do not give up.”

Don’t ever give up! God gave you to each other, and He wants you to stay with each other to the very last inch of the very last mile!

AMEN.