

Helping people through the pressure points in life 3

Caring for people in conflict

Introduction

In his book, 'Everybody is normal till you get to know them', John Ortberg has a chapter on conflict. Ortberg is honest enough to realise that we all have to deal with conflict at some point in our life. The big question is how?

Some deal with conflict by avoiding it at all costs. Others feel that they have been cheated if the weeks go by without at least one juicy argument. For those in the 'avoid conflict at all costs' category the tendency is to deny that there are problems at all. They maintain that everything is all right. They feel that it is more spiritual to ignore tensions that exist between people than to acknowledge and deal with it. As a result there is a vague undercurrent of unrest, uncertainty and mistrust. However, for those for whom only a heated and open conflict is the only way to go, the 'let's bulldoze our way through this and get it over with', the result is that people feel trampled on, criticised, discouraged. Both extremes are destructive. Both need open and careful attention in order for growth and healing to take place.

The Bible is not silent on conflict; it has much to offer that can help us deal with conflict in a godly way. This study guide I hope will help us find a way to face conflict, and find a biblical way through it, and a way for resolving conflict.

Study 1

Causes of conflict

Introduction

When children fall out, what usually comes out when an adult intervenes are the words "It's not my fault, he/ she made me do it." "He/she hit me first." Not very often will a child say, "It was my fault I took the toy, I'm sorry." Often as an adult our first impulse when we are in a conflict is to want to blame someone else, or to blame circumstances. However the Bible suggests that we look deeper, and that we look within ourselves for the causes of conflict.

The Big picture

1. Almost every family quarrels. What are some common causes of conflict within a family?

The Biblical picture

Read James Ch 4 v 1-12

2. What does James say is the source of conflict [vs. 1-2]?
3. What kind of desires battle within people?
4. According to verses 2-3, what are some wrong ways to deal with our desires?
5. What are some of the right ways?
6. James warns us in verse 3 that wrong motives may cause our prayer to go unanswered. What tensions could this create in your praying?
7. What are examples of right and wrong motives when we pray?
8. How is further conflict developed in the life of Christians when they become friends of the world [verse 4]?
9. But he give us more grace [verse 6] is a refreshing relief to the dark picture of being in conflict with God. Taking a position of humility makes us open to God's grace. How does each of the instructions in verses 6-10 contribute to a humble spirit?
10. How does the opposite of these contribute to conflict?

Being in the picture

11. Why might a person who is appropriately humble towards God be better to follow the instructions of verses 11-12 in human relationships?
12. Often God's principles seem to be 'upside down'. We are encouraged not to 'push ourselves ahead'. Rather God speaks about being humble before Him, so that we maybe lifted up. What is the rationale behind each of these perspectives?
13. When [if ever] have you experienced this 'being lifted up' by the Lord?
14. How does looking honestly at the causes of conflict in the possible solution and ourselves for it equip us to care for others in conflict?

Take a few minutes to quietly humble yourself before God. Pray that God will help you to be aware of the sources of conflict in your own life and be released from them into God's way.

Study 2

Being part of a Healing Community

Introduction

There is no greater challenge in the building of community than to master the art of handling anger and conflict. The point is not to think we must never experience conflict in a community, after all, we remain human, even after our encounter with God through Jesus Christ. The point is the way a community deals with the conflict that is being experienced. The Bible is loaded with principles on how to deal with conflict in way that pleases God, and brings growth to those who are caught up in it, and also speaks to non-Christians who are standing outside watching.

The Big picture

1. Who is your community? [Church, cell, family, etc.]
- 2 How does your community usually deal with conflict that arises within it?

The Biblical picture

Read Acts Ch 6 vs. 1-7

3. What were the sources of tension during this period in the early church?
4. How could these sources of tension be regarded as blessings?
5. What steps were taken to bring the conflict to resolution?
6. Why is it often difficult for a group of Christians to admit that there is a problem when they have a conflict?
7. At times leaders are aware that there is a problem within a community but are reluctant to take action to resolve it. What are the possible reasons for this?
8. Verse 2 says that when the conflict became apparent the twelve gathered all the disciples. Why might leaders be reluctant to allow the whole community to participate in finding a solution?
9. Why might leaders be reluctant to delegate responsibility?
10. What evidence is there in this passage that the apostles had a unified sense about what was important?
11. What were their priorities?
12. How does a strong commitment to truly important priorities help in resolving conflict within a group of believers?
13. What was the result of the community taking these steps to deal with the complaint [verses 5-7]?

Being in the picture

14. Describe a situation within your community [see question 1] where conflict existed where you need to initiate action. What did you do?
15. How was the life of your community [see question 1] affected by openly dealing with the conflict?
16. How might it have been affected if you had dealt with the conflict in a way that was similar to this conflict in Acts Ch 6?

Study 3

The challenge of humility

Introduction

I once heard of a mother who had two sons, who, when they squabbled over whose piece of cake was the biggest, found the perfect solution. In future when she bought a cake she had one child cut the cake, and the other one choose between the two pieces. This was a 'no lose' solution, for the child doing the cutting used every means possible to ensure that the pieces were cut equally. Solutions to conflict are not always as easy to solve, sometimes answers are never as equally give and take.

The big picture

1. What does it means to sacrifice for another?

The Biblical picture

Read Genesis Ch 13.

2. Take a look at Abraham in verses 1-13. Describe him. [Consider his wealth, spiritual life, attitude towards relationships etc.]
3. What was Lot like?
4. Describe the problem that came up between Abram and Lot [verse 5-7]?
5. To solve the problem Abram allowed Lot 'to cut and choose'. In a practical way this was very costly for Abram. According to verse 8, what motivated Abram to solve the conflict in this way?
6. When are you willing to let someone else both ' cut and choose' the piece of pie in order to prevent quarrelling between you?
7. How would the fact that the other person was a Christian affect your willingness to sacrifice when you are in a conflict with them?
8. Under what circumstances do you think a Christian ought to resolve a conflict by letting the opposing party both ' cut and choose'?
9. When might this be detrimental to all concerned?
10. How is God's continued faithfulness to Abram demonstrated in verses 14-17?

Being in the picture

11. When have you experienced god's faithfulness as you have obeyed him by graciously allowing another person to 'win'?

12. Not all conflicts ought to be solved by one person totally giving in. Yet sometimes that kind of sacrifice is the best solution. Are there situations now where you need to resolve conflict by sacrifice? If so can you explain to the group/ cell?

Spend some time in prayer asking God for wisdom to know when sacrifice is the right solution to conflict, and then ask for strength to do it.

Study 4

The challenge of confronting others

Introduction

John Ortberg in his book 'Everybody's Normal till you get to know them' has a chapter entitled 'The gift nobody wants- Confrontation'.

Confrontation can be painful to give and receive. The act of confrontation is often what resolves the conflict in a relationship. However the act of confrontation can often be a great risk, simply because we can have no idea how the other person is going to react.

The big picture

1. When two people are in conflict, how are others around them affected?

The Biblical picture

Read Matthew Ch 18 vs., 15-20

2. Jesus says that the first steps of action when someone has sinned against us are to confront that person. According to verse 15, what is the purpose of responding in this way?

3. How do you usually respond when someone has sinned against you?

4. What has been the end result of such action?

5. What steps does Jesus ask us to take if our opponent does not listen to our personal confrontation [vs. 16-17]?

6. Jesus takes seriously the unity of believers. What practical reasons might there be for the Christian community to become involved in this way in a conflict that is occurring between some of its members?
7. Why do you think this kind of action on the part of the Christian community seems to be the exception instead of the rule?
8. What would you expect to happen if the instructions in this passage were more faithfully followed in our churches?
9. Verse 18 seems to further explain the importance of the role of the church in resolving conflict between Christians. What is the power that Jesus places in the hands of the church?
10. There is great encouragement in verse 19-20 to practice the actions of discipline given in this passage. In the context of this passage what do you think it means to 'agree'?
11. What is the result of Christians coming to this kind of agreement?

Being in the picture

12. What relationships are there in your life, or in the lives of those you care about, where conflict needs to be resolved through this type of confrontation?

Study 5 Admitting Wrong

Introduction

The song puts it 'sorry seems to be the hardest word.' It is equally just as hard to say 'I was wrong.' These are three difficult words to say, but also three words filled with power. These three words have the power to dissolve anger, and remove the fear of confrontation. The great Hebrew King David had an occasion to say that he was sorry, not to another human being but to God, and he took it, and God seemed to find David's three words genuine.

The big picture

1. How do you usually respond [and feel] when you have done something wrong?

The biblical picture

Read Psalm 51

2. According to this passage what physical, emotional, and spiritual effects did David's sin have on him?
3. Look more carefully at verses 1-7. What evidence is there that David took full responsibility for his sin?
4. How would you describe David's attitude or state of mind in these verses?
5. In verses 8-12, what specific request did David make of God?
6. If God were to grant all of these requests to David, what kind of person would he become?
7. David expected God to change him dramatically as a result of his sin and God's great forgiveness. When have you seen a similar change in yourself or in someone else?
8. What did David hope would be the end result of the redemptive process he had gone through [see verses 13-19]?
9. How did he hope to better care for others as a result of this process?

Being in the picture

10. How has God's forgiveness of you affected your ability to share God's ways with others?
11. How has it affected your individual and corporate worship?
12. Verse 17 says that 'God accepts the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart.' How would you describe a broken and contrite heart?
13. How can you be ready to present a broken and contrite heart to God, when is it appropriate to do this?

Study 6

The lesson of self-forgiveness

Introduction

The American preacher RT Kendall wrote a book called *Totally forgiving ourselves*, the Director Care for the family Rob Parsons called it 'perhaps the most liberating message you will ever hear.' Often we are unable to forgive ourselves; we can accept forgiveness from others, but struggle in self-forgiveness.

The big picture

1. Do you have more difficulty forgiving others or forgiving yourself? Why?

The biblical picture

Read Acts Ch 7 v 54- 8:3.

2. Saul is the Jewish name for Paul, who was largely responsible for bringing Christianity to the Roman world. What were Saul's offences?
3. How has the church affected by Saul's offences?
4. If you had been a Christian at that time how might you have felt towards Saul? Why?

Read Acts ch 9 v 1-31

5. Jesus met Saul on the road to Damascus. Describe how Jesus got Saul's attention?
6. What evidence do you find in these verses of Saul's repentance?
7. What evidence can you find throughout the remainder of this passage that Jesus forgave Saul [v 10-31]?
8. What responses did Saul's behaviour elicit from people [Ch 9 v s 13, 21, 26 might offer some clues]?
9. What do you see here that indicates that the believers forgave Saul? [Look at verses 17-19,25, 27-30]
10. What evidence is there here that Saul did not allow a weight of personal guilt to hamper his work for Christ [look at verses, 20,22, 28-29]?
11. What do you think could have happened to Saul's future development as a Christian if he had not forgiven himself?

Being in the picture

12. What do you think would be the effects on you and your ability to care for others if you were unable to forgive yourself?
13. How can you begin to freely accept God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of others?
14. How would you encourage someone who found it difficult to forgive themselves to accept God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of others?

Study 7

Learning to forgive Others

Introduction

The advice 'Do not ever withhold forgiveness from one another' is not just good in marriage counselling, it also works well in all other relationships. To incorporate such wisdom into our dealings with others adds to the health and life of our relationships. We need to understand that marriage is not the only relationship where forgiveness is crucial.

The big picture

1. Think of a time when someone forgave you. How did it make you feel?

The biblical picture

Read Genesis Ch 37.

2. In what different ways did the brothers sin against Joseph?
3. In what ways did they sin against their Father?
4. What do you consider motivated their actions?
5. How do you think each person was affected by his sin? [Consider Joseph, Jacob and the brothers].

Read Genesis Ch 45.

We have now skipped forward a good number of years. Joseph has had a roller-coaster ride of a life, now he holds a prominent position in the Egyptian Government. A famine has struck, his brother sent by Jacob to buy grain, they do not recognise Joseph, but now he has identified himself to them

6. What various emotions do you sense in this passage?
7. What actions help you gauge the intensity of those emotions?
8. What evidence can you see from this passage that Joseph forgave his brothers?
9. Why do you think Joseph was able to forgive so fully and freely [see vs.5-9]?

Being in the picture

10. What makes it difficult for you to forgive?
11. Joseph's view of God deeply affected his perspective on the circumstances of his life. How does your view of God affect your perspective on the circumstances of your life?
12. Joseph's brothers and father benefited greatly by his forgiveness. How did Joseph himself benefit?
13. What are the benefits to you when you forgive another person?

Study 8

How long do we wait for forgiveness?

Introduction

There is a story in the Bible where two very experienced Christians could not resolve their difficulties and so a great partnership ended. The story involves Paul and Barnabas. The truth is that we all need to live and serve in the constant recognition of our humanity. However in the pursuit of forgiveness in our relationships we have the joy of coming as close as any human being can be to the essentially divine act the gospel. We heal damage that has been done and create a new beginning out of past pain, but this is not easy or quick.

The big picture

1. How would you describe yourself when you are in circumstances that do not work out as you had hoped and planned?

The biblical picture

Read Acts Ch 15vs.36-41

2. In what ways can you see or assume unity between Paul and Barnabas in this passage?
3. What caused their conflict?
4. Why do you think that conflict got to the point of sharp disagreements?
5. Paul and Barnabas came to a point of agreeing to disagree, and going their separate ways. What were the benefits of this solution?
6. What might have happened if they had continued to argue?
7. When have you found yourself in sharp conflict that seemed to be an impasse?
8. What caused the conflict to get to this point?
9. How did your response to each other compare or contrast with that of Paul and Barnabas?
10. It would appear that in this passage the Holy Spirit does not intend for us to make a judgement about who was right or wrong. Paul and Barnabas each had a strong case for their point of view. Do you think that we should surrender deep convictions because they are challenged by someone else? Why or why not?

Being in the picture

11. No matter how strongly we feel about an issue, we do not see the whole picture. How should that fact affect the way we respond to someone with whom we are in conflict?

12. Various passages in the New Testament show that Paul and Mark eventually served God together [Col. Ch 4 v 10, 2 Timothy 4:11 1 Peter 5:12. In what relationships do you need to be praying and looking for healing in the long run?

Study 9

How to move on after conflict

Introduction

Church history is not always very good at showing how to restore a forgiven person back to productivity. A broken world is not uncommon it can happen to any of us. One of the saddest moments in the life of Simon Peter was when he heard the cock crow for the third time and realised that his denial of association with Jesus had been underscored. However, after Jesus forgave Peter. Jesus actively allowed and urged Peter to move on in service and productivity in the kingdom of God.

The big picture

1. Why do you think that we can be reluctant to restore fallen Christians to full productive service?

The biblical picture

Read Matthew Ch 26: 31-35 and 69-75.

2. What was Peter's attitude and response to Christ's warning that all would fall away from him?
3. When have you experienced a similar conviction that you would be faithful no matter what the cost?
4. After Peter denied Christ, the cock crowed, how did Peter respond?
5. How have you responded when you recognised that you have failed Jesus?

Following Peter denial comes Jesus crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus post-resurrection appearances also include Peter.

Read John Ch 21:15-19 and Mark Ch 16:6-7

6. What evidence do you see here that Peter wanted to be restored to full fellowship with Jesus?
7. What evidence do you see that Jesus not only forgave Peter, but that he greatly trusted this disciple?
8. How might Peter's response to Jesus, and Jesus response to Peter, help you prepare for restoration after your own failures before God?
9. What do you think, Jesus mean when he says 'feed my sheep'?

Being in the picture

10. Imagine being Peter. How would you respond to Jesus saying to you 'feed my sheep' and 'follow me', after you had just disowned him?

11. In Christ's relationship with Peter we see not only forgiveness and restoration, but also Jesus urging Peter to move out in service and productivity. Why do you think that this is so often withheld from failed Christians?

12. When and how should we do you think extend the same forgiveness and restoration to a Christian who has failed?

13. What message would you like to give to a particular person you care about who has failed Jesus?