

Mending Broken Friendships

 Read 1 John 3:10 – 19

It is inevitable that conflict will arise among God's people from time to time, for even the best of friends can differ and fall out, so it is important that we should know how to deal with it.



Why is conflict inevitable?



Often conflicts arise through misunderstanding. What are the common causes of misunderstanding between Christians?

The first thing to be clear about is that there is no such thing as a conflict that cannot be resolved. The reason I can say this with such certainty is that God has given us clear instructions in His Word for resolving our differences. If they are not resolved, then the problem is not the lack of a way to deal with them, the problem is that God is not being obeyed.

Before going any further, take time to read the following passages. They contain God's instructions for resolving our differences:

- Galatians 6:1
- Luke 17:3–10
- Ephesians 4:32
- Mark 11:25–26
- Matthew 18:15–17
- 1 Corinthians 6
- Matthew 5:23–24
- Matthew 5:38 – 48

Examine Yourself

If you are in a situation of conflict you will know that it is all too easy to find fault in the other party, but before you even consider that you must, bearing in mind the Lord's words in Matthew 7:4, examine your own heart. Here are some important things you should check out.

- **Is your overall burning desire to honour and obey the Lord?** If not, you are breaking the first and most important commandment
- **Are you being careful to follow the example of the Lord Jesus?** He is the One “who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously.”
- **Have you been disobedient to God in anything you have said or done?** In particular, have you unnecessarily intensified the conflict, used unloving words, acted unfaithfully, abused your authority or failed to respect the authority of others? Have you been harbouring hurt, indulging in gossip or fighting your own corner? Have you failed to treat others as you would want to be treated by them?



Why is it wrong that a Christian should harbour hurts and grudges?



Why should a Christian not fight his own corner when he is wronged?

If you find that you have failed in any of these things you must repent of your sin, confess it in an appropriate way and change your attitudes and behaviour irrespective of what anyone else has done to you. This is a matter of obedience to God, and whatever anyone else has done to you it is no excuse for disobedience.

Some Things Can Be Overlooked

If you love the Lord with all your heart and if you view offences biblically then, when someone sins against you, the element of personal offence will not be important: offences could be overlooked. But we cannot always do that because sin is a serious matter in God's eyes.

A sin cannot be overlooked if it is dishonouring God, damaging a relationship, offending, or likely to offend other people or harming the one who has committed it and diminishing his usefulness to God. If any of these things is true then the sin must be addressed, but notice what the motivation is: it is love to God and love to others: it is never selfish and it is certainly not a desire to vindicate oneself.

Go To Him

If an offence is one which cannot be overlooked then, following the teaching of Matthew 18:15 and 5:23-24 you must go to anyone who has offended you or anyone who you believe has something against you and address the issue. This command is clear and there can be no excuse to disobey. It is also true that obedience to it will rule out other possibilities, like taking one sided action, talking to others and brooding.

God also gives instruction on the manner of our going. You should address such issues:

- **In private:** speaking to the other party alone and in person, whenever possible, having chosen an appropriate time and place
- **In a spirit of gentleness, speaking the truth in love:** listening, asking for feedback, stating only facts of which you are sure and always being prepared to believe the best about others. You certainly should not threaten.
- **Carefully:** "...considering yourself lest you also be tempted," having taken into account your own particular weaknesses and having prayed earnestly.
- **Having carefully thought out what you will say in advance:** recognising your limits and determined to say only what is reasonable and appropriate realising, in the light of 2 Timothy 2:24-26, that repentance is a work of God.



What are the temptations you could fall into when addressing a matter that has caused conflict between you and a brother or sister in the Lord?

If He Hears You

To hear, as in Matthew 18:15, is akin to our word "listen". It has to do with understanding and taking in. When someone is confronted with a complaint that another person has against him, there are three possible responses. He can explain a possible misunderstanding, he can refuse to listen, or he can confess his fault and repent of it.

The word translated confess in the Bible literally means, "to say the same as". To confess then is to agree with one's accuser. Sincere confession is an acknowledgement of sin without excuses and is usually accompanied by a request for forgiveness. It is portrayed in the Bible as a step toward restoring a broken relationship and is appropriately made only to the person who has been offended.

Repentance is not, as some suppose, feeling sorry for one's offence. It may be accompanied by feelings of sorrow but the important thing is that it is a change of direction. It is the acknowledgement of a determination to forsake the old sinful way and making a new beginning to go forward in the right way. You are not required to judge whether another person's repentance is sincere. Luke 17:4 is clear, you must take his word for it, unless of course you have irrefutable evidence to the contrary.

Forgive Him

Luke 17:4 is also clear in saying that if someone says he repents you must forgive him.

The word forgiveness needs some explanation, for it is often misunderstood. Just like repentance, forgiveness is not primarily to do with feelings. Forgiveness is the removal of guilt.

- **Forgiveness is a promise:** when you say to someone, "I forgive you," you are making a promise to that person. You are promising that you will never again bring to mind the sin of which that person is guilty. You are, in effect, saying, "I will never bring it up again to

you, or to anyone else, and indeed, if it comes into my own mind I will immediately put it out again for I no longer wish to think of you as a guilty person, your guilt is gone.”

- **Forgiveness is costly:** it is never something that can be granted lightly for, so far as God is concerned, guilt matters and it demands the payment of a price. You may say to someone, “I will never bring it up again,” but unless the price has been paid God will demand it sooner or later. In order for forgiveness to be possible, the Lord Jesus Christ had to pay the full penalty for every sin that would ever be forgiven. He did that on the cross: that was the cost of forgiveness.
- **Forgiveness is conditional:** Jesus said, “If he repents, forgive him.” It is because forgiveness is linked to the cross that forgiveness is depends upon repentance. God does not forgive unrepentant sinners and neither does He require us to do so. We may say to the one who has offended, “I will never bring it up again,” but unless he has come to God in repentance that is not the end of the matter: his guilt is not gone.
- **Forgiveness must be without measure:** God requires us to forgive without limit because He has forgiven us without limit. If a brother sins against you seven times in the same day and each time says he repents, you must forgive him. If he sins seventy times seven, you must continue to forgive him. God says you must. Again, it is simply a matter of obedience.

Be Reconciled

The end result of the process I have described should be a fully restored, or reconciled, relationship: not merely the absence of hostility or an uneasy truce. Neither is it enough that a relationship should be restored to what it formerly was. No, things should now be even better. With lessons learned, the relationship that was broken by sin should now approximate more to what it should be: the kind of relationship God requires between His children.

One aspect of reconciliation that is often overlooked is the making of restitution. If someone has suffered material loss because of your sin you have a duty to make up that loss to him. You can read more about this in Numbers 5:5-8 and Exodus 22:1-15.

If He Does Not Hear You

If the matter cannot be resolved in private between you and the other party, you must bring along one or two others who will help to resolve misunderstandings and perhaps act as witnesses to the facts.

Ultimately, if the matter remains unresolved, you must ask the elders of your church to judge in the matter. Once they have come to a decision the matter of who is right and who is wrong can be dropped: it has now become a matter of obedience to the authority of the elders, appointed under God to maintain order and discipline within His church.

Treat Him As A Sinner

The teaching of Matthew 18 goes one stage further. If someone refuses to accept the authority of the church, that person is to be treated as an unbeliever. A few things need to be said about this instruction, for it is often misunderstood.

First, remember that sinners are sinners by nature. They are only doing what comes naturally so do not be surprised or unduly upset when they sin against you. Their sinful nature is the real problem and remember, you were once like that too. Remember how much have you been forgiven.

Secondly, remember that God is a God of justice. You do not need to make someone pay for what he has done to you, and you do not need to carry resentment. God will see that justice is done so, commit yourself to God who judges rightly.

Matthew 5:38–48 gives some further helpful advice on how you should deal with an unrepentant sinner:

- Do not resist him.
- Love him.
- Bless him.
- Do good for him.
- Pray for him.
- Remember that your priority is his salvation.

Remember too, these things still apply, even when someone has been put out of the church for refusal to accept the ruling of the elders.

This Is Important

It is not possible to overemphasise the importance of resolving our conflicts as God says we should. Nothing does more harm to the witness of the church than unresolved conflicts between those who claim to know the Lord.