

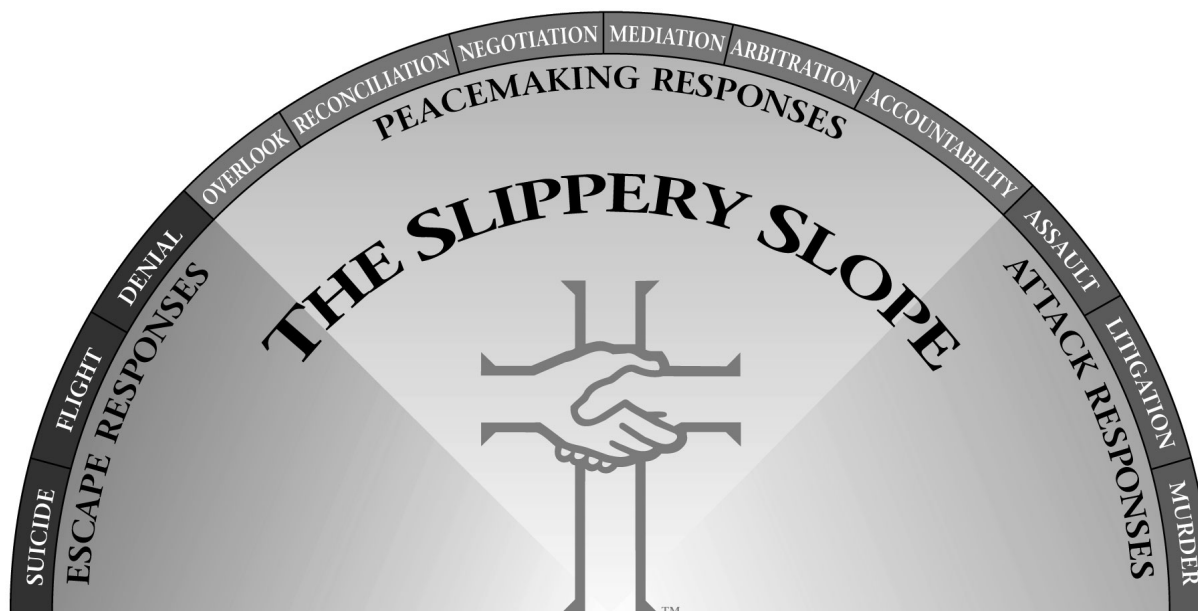
Introduction

God desires that we have peace with Him and with each other. Yet, many of our relationships are marked by bitterness, hostility, resentment, and anger. These emotions overflow into biting words and vengeful actions. How can we restore peace to a broken relationship? What does God have to say about dealing with difficult people, wrongs committed in the past, granting forgiveness, and seeking reconciliation?

This 6-week course will explore what God says about the source of, and solution to, problems in all our relationships, whether family members, co-workers, or neighbors. We will consult God's guidebook for life, the Bible, to see what He says about how to know peace in our lives and relationships.

Staying on Top of Conflict¹

I. The Slippery Slope of Conflict

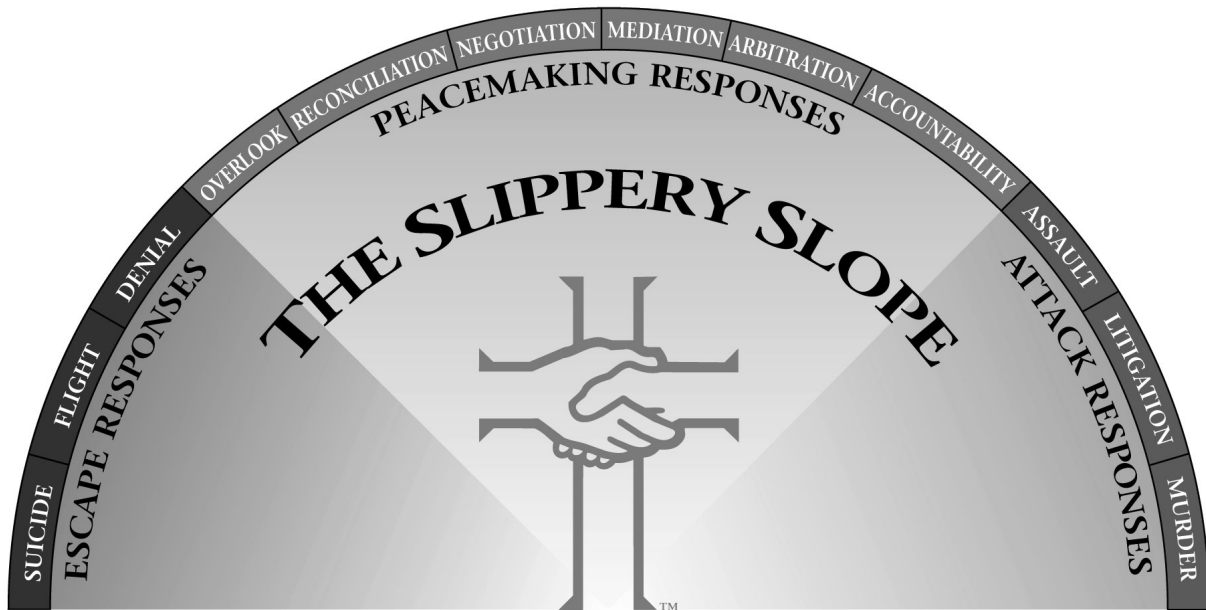


A. Escape Responses

The three responses found on the left side of the slippery slope are commonly used by people who are more interested in avoiding or getting away from a conflict than resolving it.

1. Denial—One way to escape from a conflict is to pretend that no problem exists. Another way is to refuse to do what should be done to resolve a conflict properly. These responses bring only temporary relief and usually make matters worse (see 1 Sam. 2:22-25).
2. Flight—Another way to escape from a conflict is to run away. This may take the form of ending a friendship, quitting a job, filing for divorce, or leaving a church. Flight may be legitimate in extreme situations (see 1 Sam. 19:9-10), but in most cases it only postpones a proper solution to the problem (see Gen. 16:6-8).
3. Suicide—When people lose all hope of resolving a conflict, they may seek to escape the situation (or make a desperate cry for help) by attempting to take their own lives. Suicide is never a right way to deal with conflict (see Matt. 27:1-5).

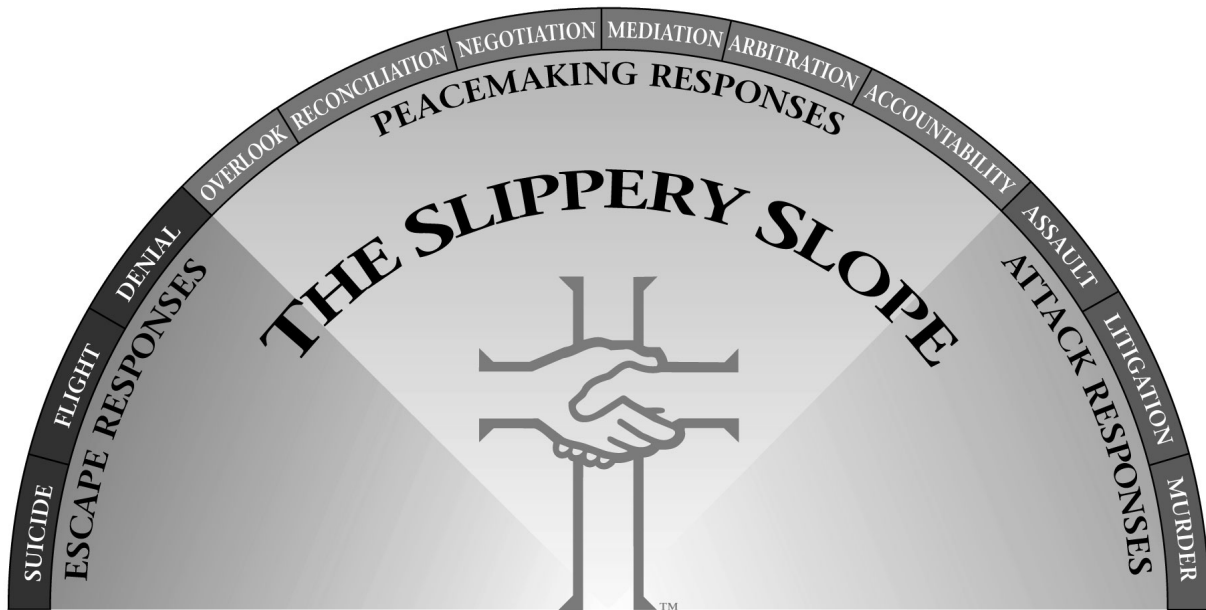
¹ From Peacemaker Ministries – see www.peacemaker.net.



B. Attack Responses

The three responses found on the right side of the slippery slope are often used by people who are more interested in winning a conflict than in preserving a relationship.

1. Assault—Some people try to overcome an opponent by using various forms of force or intimidation, such as verbal attacks (including gossip and slander), physical violence, or efforts to damage a person financially or professionally (see Acts 6:8-15). Such conduct usually escalates conflict.
2. Litigation—Although some conflicts may legitimately be taken before a civil judge (see Acts 24:1-26:32; Rom. 13:1-5), lawsuits usually damage relationships, diminish our Christian witness, and often fail to achieve complete justice. This is why Christians are commanded to make every effort to settle their differences within the church rather than the civil courts (see Matt. 5:25-26; 1 Cor. 6:1-8).
3. Murder—In extreme cases, people may be so desperate to win a dispute that they will try to kill those who oppose them (see Acts 7:54-58). While most people would not actually kill someone, we should never forget that we stand guilty of murder in God's eyes when we harbor anger or contempt in our hearts toward others (see 1 John 3:15; Matthew 5:21-22).



C. Conciliation Responses

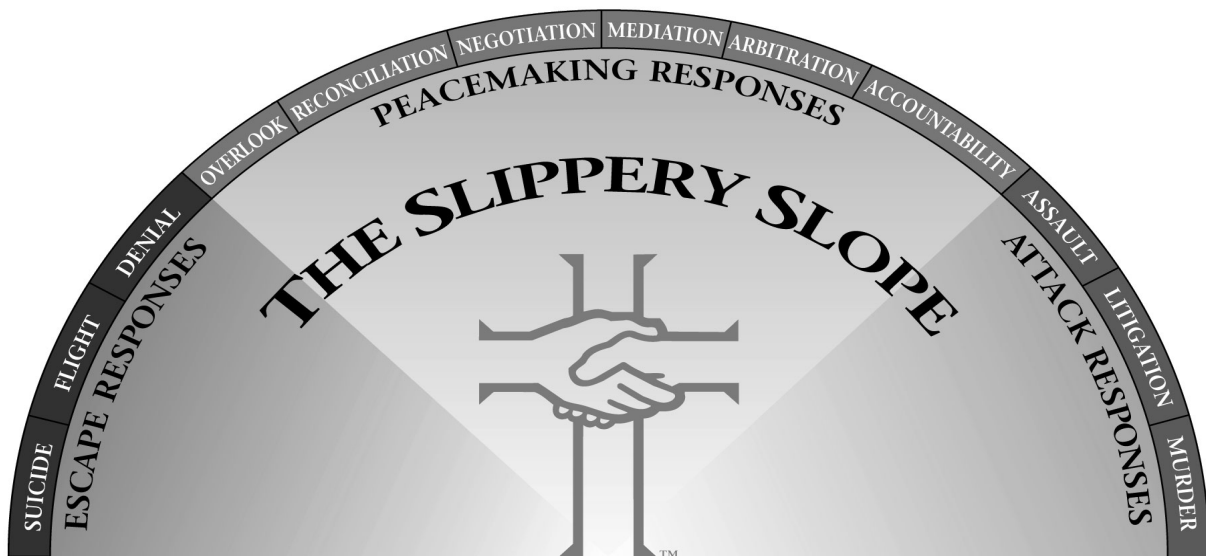
The Gospel is the key to peace. A true peacemaker is guided, motivated, and empowered by the gospel, the good news that God has forgiven all our sins and made peace with us through the death and resurrection of his Son (Col. 1:19-20). Through Christ he has also enabled us to break the habit of escaping from conflict or attacking others, and he has empowered us to become peacemakers who can promote genuine justice and reconciliation (Col. 3:12-14).

The six responses found on the top portion of the slippery slope are directed at finding a just and mutually agreeable solution to a conflict. These responses may be divided into two categories: personal peacemaking responses and assisted responses:

1. Personal peacemaking responses

These are carried out in private between the parties themselves. Although it is appropriate for one or both parties to seek advice on how to implement these responses, they should normally try to resolve their differences one-on-one before asking others to intervene in the dispute.

- a. Overlook an offense—Many disputes are so insignificant that they should be resolved by quietly and deliberately overlooking an offense. “A man’s wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense” (Prov. 19:11). Overlooking an offense is a form of forgiveness, and involves a deliberate decision not to talk about it, dwell on it, or let it grow into pent-up bitterness or anger.



- b. Reconciliation—If an offense is too serious to overlook or has damaged our relationship, we need to resolve personal or relational issues through confession, loving correction, and forgiveness. “[If] your brother has something against you ... go and be reconciled” (Matt. 5:23-24). “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Gal. 6:1; see Matt. 18:15). “Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Col. 3:13).
- c. Negotiation—Even if we successfully resolve *relational* issues, we may still need to work through *material* issues related to money, property, or other rights. This should be done through a cooperative bargaining process in which you and the other person seek to reach a settlement that satisfies the legitimate needs of each side. “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4).

If the parties cannot resolve a dispute through personal peacemaking, they should pursue ...

2. Assisted responses

This will require that they seek help from other people in their church or community.

- a. Mediation—If two people cannot reach an agreement in private, they should ask one or more objective outside people to meet with them to help them communicate more effectively and explore possible solutions. “If he will not listen [to you], take one or two others along” (Matt. 18:16). These mediators may ask questions and give advice, but have no authority to force you to accept a particular solution.



- b. Arbitration—When you and an opponent cannot come to a voluntary agreement on a material issue, you may appoint one or more arbitrators to listen to your arguments and render a binding decision to settle the issue. “If you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church” (1 Corinthians 6:4).
- c. Accountability—If a person who professes to be a Christian refuses to be reconciled and do what is right, Jesus commands his or her church leaders to formally intervene to hold him or her accountable to Scripture and to promote repentance, justice, and forgiveness: “If he refuses to listen [to others], tell it to the church” (Matthew 18:17).

II. Definition of Conflict

Conflict is a difference in opinion or purpose that frustrates someone’s goals or desires.

This definition is broad enough to encompass run-of-the-mill variations in taste, such as one spouse wanting a vacation in the mountains while the other prefers the waterfront, as well as hostile arguments, such as fights, quarrels, lawsuits, and church divisions.

III. A Biblical View of Conflict

A. Four primary causes of conflict:

1. Misunderstandings, resulting from poor communication (see Joshua 22:10-34)
2. Differences in values, goals, gifts, calling, priorities, expectations, interests, or opinions (see Acts 15:39; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31)
3. Competition over limited resources, such as time or money (see Genesis 13:1-12)
4. Sinful attitudes and habits that lead to sinful words and actions (see James 4:1-2)

B. Conflict is not necessarily bad.

1. Some differences are natural and beneficial.

While we should seek unity in our relationships, we should not demand uniformity (see Ephesians 4:1-3).

2. Many disagreements are the result of sinful attitudes and behavior.

Conflict Provides Opportunities²

Our response to conflict should not be purely practical – “I want the problem solved.” Of course, we should desire peace, but we cannot guarantee the outcome, since it requires the cooperation of those outside our control: *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.* (Romans 12:18). However, we can always accomplish God’s good purposes in our lives in the midst of any conflict, even those that remain unresolved. Author Ken Sande says,

The Bible teaches that we should see conflict neither as an inconvenience nor as an occasion to force our will on others, but rather as an opportunity to demonstrate the love and power of God in our lives. This is what [the Bible instructed] when [some Christians were involved in] religious, legal, and dietary disputes [that] threatened to divide their church:

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God — even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.
(1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1)

This passage presents a radical view of conflict: It encourages us to look at conflict as an opportunity to ...

I. Glorify God

“Conflict always provides an opportunity to glorify God, that is, to bring him praise and honor by showing who He is, what He is like, and what He is doing. The best way to glorify God in the midst of conflict is to depend on and draw attention to His grace, that is, the undeserved love, mercy, forgiveness, strength, and wisdom he gives us through Jesus Christ. You can do this in several ways:”³

A. You can trust God.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. (Proverbs 3:5-7)

² The remainder of this notebook is adapted from Ken Sande and Kay Moore, *Peacefakers, Peacebreakers, and Peacemakers* (Hannibal Books, 2005), which is based on Sande’s larger book, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Baker Books, 2004).

³ Sande, *The Peacemaker*, p. 31.

- B. You can obey God.

If you love me, you will obey what I command ... Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me ... If anyone love me, he will obey my teaching ... He who does not love me will not obey my teaching ... the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commended me”.

(John 14:15-31)

- C. You can imitate God.

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

- D. You can acknowledge God.

It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. (Philippians 2:13)

II. Grow to be like Christ

- A. Conflict often exposes sinful attitudes and habits in our lives.
- B. Conflict offers opportunity to practice new attitudes and habits.

III. Serve others

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. (Luke 6:27-28)

- A. God may use you to help your opponent.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4)

- B. God may use you to bear your opponent's burden.

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ ... Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. (Galatians 6:2, 9-10)

- C. God may use you to lovingly confront your opponent.

If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. (Galatians 6:1)

- D. God may use you to introduce your opponent to Jesus Christ.

In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

(1 Peter 3:15-16)

- E. God may use you to teach by your example.

Conflict Starts in the Heart

Conflict involves both action and reaction. If we initiate conflict by our words or actions, then we know we're at fault, whether we're willing to admit it or not. But it gets more difficult when someone else initiates, and we simply respond. In those cases, we tend to point at the other party, or perhaps the circumstance, and blame them/it: "He knows how to push my buttons" or "All I wanted was some peace and quiet and I come home to ...". Our tendency is to point outward, to the initiating person or situation, to the stimulus rather than our response. But the Bible teaches that conflict is always an 'inside job':

[Jesus said]: *Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.* (Matthew 15:19)

I. The Root of Conflict is Idolatry.

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? 2 You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God.

3 When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

4 You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. 5 Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? 6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:1-6)

II. Dealing with Idolatry

A. The definition of an idol

An idol is anything apart from God that controls us and that we depend on to be happy, fulfilled, or secure.

B. The progression of an Idol

1. I Desire.

Conflict always begins with some kind of desire. Some desires are inherently wrong, such as vengeance, lust, or greed. But many desires are not wrong in and of themselves. For example, there is nothing innately wrong about desiring things like peace and quiet, a clean home, a new computer, professional success, an intimate relationship with your spouse, or respectful children.

If a good desire, such as wanting an intimate relationship with your spouse, is not being met, it is perfectly legitimate to talk about it with your spouse. As you talk, you may discover ways that both of you can help to fulfill each other in mutually beneficial ways. If not, it may be appropriate to seek help from your pastor or a Christian counselor who can assist you in understanding your differences and strengthening your marriage.

But what if your spouse persistently fails to meet a particular desire and is unwilling to discuss it further with you or anyone else? This is where you stand at a crossroad. On the one hand, you can trust God and seek your fulfillment in Him (Psalm 73:25). You can ask Him to help you to continue to grow and mature no matter what your spouse does (James 1:2-4). And you can continue to love your spouse and pray for God's sanctifying work in his or her life (1 John 4:19-21; Luke 6:27-28). If you follow this course, God promises to bless you and use your difficult situation to conform you to the likeness of Christ (Romans 8:28-29).

On the other hand, you can dwell on your disappointment and allow it to control your life. At the very least, this will result in self-pity and bitterness toward your spouse. At worst, it can destroy your marriage. Let us look at how this downward spiral evolves.

2. I Demand.

Unmet desires have the potential of working themselves deeper and deeper into our hearts. This is especially true when we come to see a desire as something we need or deserve, and therefore must have in order to be happy or fulfilled. There are many ways to justify or legitimize a desire.

- “I work hard all week. Don't I deserve a little peace and quiet when I come home?”
- “I worked two jobs to put you through school; I deserve your respect and appreciation.”
- “I spend hours managing the family budget; I really need a new computer.”
- “The Bible says we should save up to cover unexpected problems; we need to tighten our budget so we can put more into savings.”
- “God has given me a gift for developing new businesses, and He calls me to work hard to support our family. I deserve to have more of your support.”
- “Scripture says a husband and wife should be completely united in love. I need to have more intimacy with you.”
- “I only want what God commands: children who have learned to respect their parents and use their God-given gifts to the fullest.”

There is an element of validity in each of these statements. The trouble is that if our desire is not met, these attitudes can lead to a vicious cycle. The more we want something, the more we think of it as something we need and deserve. And the more we think we are entitled to it, the more convinced we are that we cannot be happy and secure without it.

When we see our object of desire as being essential to our fulfillment and well-being, it moves from being a desire to a demand. "I wish I could have this" evolves into "I must have this!" This is where trouble sets in. Even if the initial desire was not inherently wrong, it has grown so strong that it begins to control our thoughts and behavior. In biblical terms, it has become an "idol."

Most of us think of an idol as a statue of wood, stone, or metal worshiped by pagan people. But the concept is much broader and far more personal than that. An idol is anything apart from God that we depend on to be happy, fulfilled, or secure. In biblical terms it is something other than God that we set our heart on (Luke 12:29), that motivates us (1 Corinthians 4:5), that masters and rules us (Psalm 119:133; Ephesians 5:5), or that we trust, fear, or serve (Isaiah 42:17; Matthew 6:24; Luke 12:4-5). In short, it is something we love and pursue in place of God (see Philippians 3:19).

Given its controlling effect on our lives, an idol can also be referred to as a "false god" or a "functional god." As Martin Luther wrote, "To whatever we look for any good thing and for refuge in every need, that is what is meant by 'god.' To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in him from the heart.... To whatever you give your heart and entrust your being, that, I say, is really your god."²

Even sincere Christians struggle with idolatry. We may believe in God and say we want to serve Him only, but at times we allow other influences to rule us. In this sense we are no different from the ancient Israelites: "Even while these people were worshiping the LORD, they were serving their idols. To this day their children and grandchildren continue to do as their fathers did" (2 Kings 17:41).

It is important to emphasize the fact that idols can arise from good desires as well as wicked desires. It is often not what we want that is the problem, but that we want it too much. For example, it is not unreasonable for a man to want a passionate sexual relationship with his wife, or for a wife to want open and honest communication with her husband, or for either of them to want a steadily growing savings account. These are good desires, but if they turn into demands that must be met in order for either spouse to be satisfied and fulfilled, they result in bitterness, resentment, or self-pity that can destroy a marriage.

3. I Judge.

Another sign of idolatry is the inclination to judge other people. When they fail to satisfy our desires and live up to our expectations, we criticize and condemn in our hearts if not with our words. As David Powlison writes:

We judge others—criticize, nit-pick, nag, attack, condemn—because we literally play God. This is heinous. [The Bible says] “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you to judge your neighbor?” Who are you when you judge? None other than a God wannabe. In this, we become like the Devil himself (no surprise that the Devil is mentioned in James 3:15 and 4:7). We act exactly like the adversary who seeks to usurp God's throne and who acts as the accuser of the brethren. When you and I fight, our minds become filled with accusations: your wrongs and my rights preoccupy me. We play the self-righteous judge in the mini-kingdoms we establish.

This insight should leave us shaking in our boots! When we judge others and condemn them in our hearts for not meeting our desires, we are imitating the Devil (see James 3:15; 4:7). We have doubled our idolatry problem: Not only have we let an idolatrous desire rule our hearts, but we have also set ourselves up as judging minigods. This is a formula for excruciating conflict.

This is not to say that it is inherently wrong to evaluate or even judge others within certain limits. Scripture teaches that we should observe and evaluate others' behavior so that we can respond and minister to them in appropriate ways, which may even involve loving confrontation (see Matthew 7:1-5; 18:15; Galatians 6:1).

We cross the line, however, when we begin to sinfully judge others, which is characterized by a feeling of superiority, indignation, condemnation, bitterness, or resentment. Sinful judging often involves speculating on others' motives. Most of all, it reveals the absence of a genuine love and concern toward them. When these attitudes are present, our judging has crossed the line and we are playing God.

The closer we are to others, the more we expect of them and the more likely we are to judge them when they fail to meet our expectations. For example, we may look at our spouse and think, “If you really love me, you above all people will help meet this need.” We think of our children and say, “After all I've done for you, you owe this to me.”

We can place similar expectations on relatives, close friends, or members of our church. Expectations are not inherently bad. It is good to hope for the best in others and reasonable to anticipate receiving understanding and support from those who are closest to us.

But if we are not careful, these expectations can become conditions and standards that we use to judge others. Instead of giving people room for independence, disagreement, or failure, we rigidly impose our expectations on them. In effect, we expect them to give allegiance to our idols. When they refuse to do so, we condemn them in our hearts and with our words, and our conflicts with them take on a heightened intensity.

4. I Punish.

Idols always demand sacrifices. When others fail to satisfy our demands and expectations, our idols demand that they should suffer. Whether deliberately or unconsciously, we will find ways to hurt or punish people so they will give in to our desires.

This punishment can take many forms. Sometimes we react in overt anger, lashing out with hurtful words to inflict pain on those who fail to meet our expectations. When we do so, we are essentially placing others on the altar of our idol and sacrificing them, not with a pagan knife, but with the sharp edge of our tongue. Only when they give in to our desire and give us what we want will we stop inflicting pain upon them.

But we punish those who don't bow to our idols in numerous other ways as well. Our children may use pouting, stomping, or dirty looks to hurt us for not meeting their desires. Adults and children alike may impose guilt or shame on others by walking around with pained or crushed looks on their faces. Some people even resort to physical violence or sexual abuse to punish and control others.

As we grow in faith and awareness of our sin, most of us recognize and reject overt and obviously sinful means of punishing others. But our idols do not give up their influence easily, and they often lead us to develop more subtle means of punishing those who do not serve them.

Withdrawal from a relationship is a common way to hurt others. This may include a subtle coolness toward the other person, withholding affection or physical contact, being sad or gloomy, refusing to look someone in the eye, or even abandoning the relationship altogether.

Sending subtle, unpleasant cues over a long period of time is an age-old method of inflicting punishment. For example, a friend of mine mentioned to me that his wife was not pleased with the fact that he was giving so much time to a particular ministry. He closed by saying, "And as we all know, when momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy!" He laughed as he said it, but his comment made me think of the proverb, "A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day" (Proverbs 27:15). A woman has a unique ability to set the tone in a home. If she is not careful, she can pervert that gift and use it to create an unpleasant or uncomfortable atmosphere that tells her family, "Either get in line with what I want, or you will suffer." Such behavior is an act of unbelief: Instead of relying on God's means of grace to sanctify her family, she depends on her own tools of punishment to manipulate them into change. Of course, a man can do the same thing; by being perpetually critical and unhappy, he too can make everyone in the family miserable until they give in to his idols. The usual result of such behavior is a superficial, splintered family.

Inflicting pain on others is one of the surest signs that an idol is ruling our hearts. When we catch ourselves punishing others in any way, whether deliberately and overtly or unconsciously and subtly, it is a warning that something other than God is ruling our hearts.

C. The identification of an idol

How can you discern when a good desire might be turning into a sinful demand? Ask x-ray questions to identify desire that may have become idols:

- What am I preoccupied with? What is the first thing on my mind in the morning and the last thing on my mind at night?
- How would I complete this statement: "If only _____, then I would be happy, fulfilled, and secure"?
- What do I want to preserve or avoid?
- Where do I put my trust?
- What do I fear?
- When a certain desire is not met, do I feel frustration, anxiety, resentment, bitterness, anger, or depression?
- Is there something I desire so much that I am willing to disappoint or hurt others in order to have it?

As you search your heart for idols, you will often encounter multiple layers of concealment, disguise, and justification. As mentioned earlier, one of the most subtle cloaking devices is to argue that we want only what God Himself commands.

For example, a mother may desire that her children be respectful and obedient to her, kind to one another, and diligent in developing their gifts and talents. And she can back up each goal with a specific scripture that shows that God Himself desires such behavior.

When they do not fulfill these goals, even after her repeated encouragement or correction, she may feel frustrated, angry, or resentful. She needs to ask, "Why am I feeling this way? Is it a righteous anger that they are not living up to God's standards? Or is it a selfish anger that they are not giving me the smooth, comfortable, and convenient day I want?"

In most cases, it will be a mixture of both. Part of her truly wants to see her children love and obey God in every way, both for His glory and for their good. But another part of her is motivated by a desire for her own comfort and convenience. Which desire is really controlling her heart and reactions?

If the God-centered desire is dominating the mother's heart, her response to disobedient children should be characterized by God's discipline toward her. "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Psalm 103:8). As she imitates God, her response will line up with corrective guidelines found in Galatians 6:1: "If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." In other words, although her discipline may be direct and firm, it will be wrapped in gentleness and love, and leave no residue of resentment or unforgiveness.

On the other hand, if her desire for comfort and convenience has become an idol, her reaction to her children will be much different. It will be characterized by smoldering anger as well as harsh and unnecessarily hurtful words or discipline. She may feel bitterness or resentment that her desires have been frustrated. And even after disciplining her children, she may maintain a lingering coolness toward them that extends their punishment and warns them not to cross her again. If this latter group of attitudes and actions frequently characterizes her response, it is a sign that her desire for godly children has probably evolved into an idolatrous demand.

III. The Cure for an Idolatrous Heart

An idol, as we have seen, is any desire that has grown into a consuming demand that rules our heart; it is something we think we must have to be happy, fulfilled, or secure. To put it another way, it is something we love, fear, or trust.

Love, fear, trust—these are words of worship! Jesus commands us to love God, fear God, and trust God and God alone (Matthew 22:37; Luke 12:4-5; John 14:1). Any time we long for something apart from God, fear something more than God, or trust in something other than God to make us happy, fulfilled, or secure, we are engaging in the worship of false gods. As a result, we deserve the judgment and wrath of the true God.

A. Deliverance from judgment

There is only one way out of this bondage and judgment: It is to look to God Himself, who loves to deliver people from their idols. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2-3).

God has provided the cure for our idolatry by sending His Son to experience the punishment that we deserve because of our sin. Through Jesus Christ we can become righteous in God's sight and find freedom from sin and idolatry. “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:1-2).

To receive this forgiveness and freedom, we must acknowledge our sin, repent of it, and put our trust in Jesus Christ (see Acts 3:19; Psalm 32:5). When we do, we are no longer under God's judgment. Instead, He brings us into His family, makes us His children and heirs, and enables us to live a godly life (Galatians 4:4-7). This is the good news of the gospel—forgiveness and eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ!

B. Deliverance from specific idols

God wants to deliver us not only from our general problem with sin and idolatry, but also from the specific, day-to-day idols that consume us, control us, and cause conflict with those around us.

This deliverance is not done in blanket fashion, with all our idols being swept away in one great spiritual experience. Instead, God calls us to identify and confess our idols one by one, and then to cooperate with Him as He steadily removes them bit by bit from our hearts.

God conveys His grace to help us in this identification and deliverance process via three vehicles: His Bible, His Spirit, and His church. The Bible is “living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). As you diligently study and meditate on the Bible and sit under regular, sound preaching, God will use His Word like a spotlight and a scalpel in your heart. It will reveal your idolatrous desires and show you how to love and worship God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.

The Holy Spirit aids our deliverance from idols by helping us to understand the Bible, to identify our sin, and to pursue a godly life (1 Corinthians 2:10-15; Philippians 2:13). Therefore, we should pray on a daily basis for the Spirit to guide, convict, and strengthen us in our walk with Christ.

Finally, God has surrounded us with brothers and sisters in Christ who can teach us, lovingly confront us about our idols, and provide encouragement and guidance in our spiritual growth (Galatians 6:1; Romans 15:14). This requires that we commit ourselves to consistent involvement in a solid, biblical church and seek regular fellowship and accountability from spiritually mature believers.

Through these three vehicles of grace, God will help you examine your life and progressively expose and deliver you from the idols that rule your heart. This process involves several key steps.

- Prayerfully ask yourself the x-ray questions listed previously, which will help you discern the desires that have come to rule your heart.
- Keep track of your discoveries in a journal so that you can identify patterns and steadily go after specific idols.
- Pray daily that God would rob your idols of their influence in your life by making you miserable whenever you give in to them.
- Describe your idols to your spouse and an accountability partner, and ask them to pray for you and lovingly confront you when they see signs that the idol is still controlling you.
- Realize that idols are masters of change and disguise. As soon as you gain a victory over a particular sinful desire, your idol is likely to reappear in a related form, with a redirected desire and more subtle means of attracting your attention.
- If you are dealing with an idol that is difficult to identify or conquer, go to your pastor or some other spiritually mature advisor, and seek his or her counsel and support.
- Most of all, ask God to replace your idols with a growing love for Him and a consuming desire to worship Him and Him alone (more on this below).

If someone told you that you had a deadly cancer that would take your life if you did not get treatment, you would probably spare no effort or expense in pursuing the most rigorous treatment available. Well, you do have cancer, a cancer of the soul. It is called sin and idolatry. But there is a cure. It is called the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is administered through the Word, the Spirit, and the church. The more rigorously you avail yourself of these means of grace, the greater effect they will have in delivering you from the idols that plague your soul.

C. Replace idol worship with worship of the true God.

In his excellent book *Future Grace*, John Piper teaches that “sin is what you do when you are not fully satisfied in God.” The same may be said about idolatry: It is what we do when we are not fully satisfied in God. In other words, if we are not fulfilled and secure in God, we will inevitably seek other sources of happiness and security.

Therefore, if you want to squeeze the idols out of your heart and leave no room for them to return, make it your top priority to aggressively pursue an all-consuming worship for the living God. Ask Him to teach you how to love, fear, and trust Him more than anything in this world. Replacing idol worship with worship of the true God involves several steps:

- **Repent before God.** When we repent and confess our sins and idols, believing in our forgiveness through Christ, we also confess our faith in Christ. Repentance and confession of our faith in the true God is true worship (1 John 1:8-10). “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17; see also Isaiah 66:2b).
- **Fear God.** Stand in awe of the true God when you are tempted to fear others or are afraid of losing something precious. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of [all wisdom]” (Proverbs 1:7). “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared” (Psalm 130:3-4).
- **Love God.** Desire the One who forgives us and provides everything we need instead of looking to other things that cannot save you. “Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’” (Matthew 22:37). “Those who seek the LORD lack no good thing” (Psalm 34:10). “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:25-26).

- **Trust God.** Rely on the One who sacrificed His Son for you and has proven Himself to be absolutely dependable in every situation. “It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man” (Psalm 118:8). “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5). “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Peter 1:3-4).
- **Delight in God.** Find your greatest joy in thinking about God, meditating on His works, talking to others about Him, praising Him, and giving Him thanks. “Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4). “My mouth is filled with your praise, declaring your splendor all day long” (Psalm 71:8). “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

As these passages indicate, God has designed a wonderful cycle for those who want to worship Him above all things. As you love, praise, give thanks, and delight yourself in God, He will fulfill your desires with the best thing in the world: more of Himself! And as you learn to delight more and more in Him, you will feel less need to find happiness, fulfillment, and security in the things of this world. By God's grace, the influence of idolatry and conflict in your life can be steadily diminished, and you can enjoy the intimacy and security that come from worshiping the one true God.

The Power for Peacemaking

“If my own heart is a veritable idol factory, then how can I find the humility and grace to desire and initiate peace?” The answer is, you need a new heart. The bad news is, our hearts are, according to Jeremiah 17:9: “deceitful above all things and beyond cure.” Our condition is beyond cure, *if left to ourselves*. But the good news, the Gospel, is that God has taken initiative to reconcile us to Himself, and empower us to be reconciled to others.

I. The Gospel Gives Us Peace with God.

The gospel is the good news that the King has come, as promised in the Holy Scriptures, in the person and loving work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Prince of Peace, Savior of the world, Lord of all, who died on the cross for our sins and was resurrected from the dead, sending forth his Spirit and Word to give us life through a new heart and spirit, forgiving all who will believe in him and crediting to us his perfect righteousness, reconciling and uniting us to the Father and adopting us as dearly loved children, and giving to us the supreme gift of knowing and enjoying God in Christ forever.

- A. *The gospel is the good news that the King has come, as promised in the Holy Scriptures in the person and loving work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Prince of Peace, Savior of the world, Lord of all;*

“You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36).

“Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel.... For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day” (1 Cor. 15:1-4).

“They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!’” (John 12:13; see 18:37).

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.” (1 John 3:16; see Rom 5:8).

“And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6).

“And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14).

“You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36).

- B. ... *who died on the cross for our sins and was resurrected from the dead,*

“He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Romans 4:25)

“For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit” (1 Pet. 3:18).

- C. ... *sending forth his Spirit and Word to give us life through a new heart and spirit,*

“He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Tit. 3:5-6).

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezek. 36:26-27).

“For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23).

- D. ... *forgiving all who will believe in him and crediting to us his perfect righteousness,*

“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28; see 1 John 1:8).

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“The words ... were written ... for us, to whom God will credit righteousness--for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (Rom. 4:23-24).

- E. ... *reconciling and uniting us to the Father and adopting us as dearly loved children,*

“He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (Col. 1:22; see Rom. 5:11).

“If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection” (Rom. 6:5).

“He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will” (Eph. 1:15).

“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:1).

- F. ... and giving us the supreme gift of knowing and enjoying God in Christ forever.

“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6).

“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1-2).

“You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand” (Psalm 16:11).

II. The Gospel Enables Us to Have Peace with Others.

Having given us peace with God, Jesus enables us to mirror his peace to others by:

- A. ... inspiring us to love, worship, glorify, obey, and serve God with all our hearts,

“Peace to the brothers, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love” (Ephesians 6:23-24).

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 15:5-6; see Exodus 33:18-19; 34:5-8; 1 Chronicles 16:23-24; Philippians 4:4).

“If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15).

“How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” (Hebrews 9:14).

- B. ... uniting us in spirit and purpose with other believers in his body, the Church,

“May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23).

“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” (Philippians 2:1-2).

“And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1:22-23).

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit” (Ephesians 4:1-4).

C. *... empowering us to lovingly restore and forgive others, even our enemies,*

“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.” (1 Thessalonians 3:12; see John 13:34-35).

“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Galatians 6:1).

“Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace” (Colossians 3:12-15).

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the Sons of God” (Matthews 5:9; see James 3:17-18).

“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28).

D. *... enabling us to put off sinful ways and be renewed in his likeness,*

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8).

“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24).

“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

E. ... and making us ambassadors of his life-giving, reconciling power.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us” (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).

“I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead” (Ephesians 1:18-20).

“Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’” (Matthew 28:18-20).

Confession Brings Freedom

As God opens your eyes to see how you have sinned against others, he simultaneously offers you a way to find freedom from your past wrongs. It is called confession. Many people have never experienced this freedom because they have never learned how to confess their wrongs honestly and unconditionally. Instead, they use words like these: “I’m sorry if I hurt you.” “Let’s just forget the past.” “I suppose I could have done a better job.” “I guess it’s not all your fault.” These token statements rarely trigger genuine forgiveness and reconciliation. If you really want to make peace, ask God to help you breathe grace by humbly and thoroughly admitting your wrongs.

I. Repentance: Much Used, But Little Understood

- A. Repentance is more than a feeling.
- B. Repentance is “a change of mind that leads to a change of direction.”

II. Changing the Way You Talk

- A. No longer use your tongue to injure:

- 1. Slander

This includes lying, exaggeration, telling half-truths, destroying trust.

Do not go about spreading slander among your people. (Leviticus 19:16)

- 2. Falsehood

This includes careless, critical, meaningless words not designed to benefit others.

Do not testify against your neighbor without cause, or use your lips to deceive. (Proverbs 24:28)

- 3. Gossip

This includes betraying a confidence or discussing unflattering personal facts about a person.

A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends. (Proverbs 16:28)

- 4. Worthless talk

This includes saying what springs to mind without thinking about consequences.

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)

5. Grumbling and complaining

This includes speaking false and malicious words about a person.

Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. (James 5:9)

B. Using your tongue to bless:

Confession means "to say the same thing."

The seven A's of confession:⁴

1. Address everyone involved (All those whom you affected)
2. Avoid if, but, and maybe (Do not try to excuse your wrongs)
3. Admit specifically (Both attitudes and actions)
4. Acknowledge the hurt (Express sorrow for hurting someone)
5. Accept the consequences (Such as making restitution)
6. Alter your behavior (Change your attitudes and actions)
7. Ask for forgiveness

⁴ See www.peacemaker.net

Seeking to Gently Restore

The word ‘confrontation’ has a negative connotation for many of us. It conjures up notions of heated arguments and debates. But we all need to be confronted from time to time, for our own good, to help and restore us when we’ve done wrong. The Bible commands to us to ‘warn’ and ‘admonish’ one another. The Greek word that is translated by those terms means: “loving confrontation with the truth for the purpose of change.” The goal of approaching someone is restoration, not condemnation.

I. The Circumstances of Confrontation

- A. You must approach someone when they believe you have wronged them.

If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24)

- B. You may approach someone when you believe they have wronged you.

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. (Matthew 18:15)

- C. You may choose to overlook a wrong committed against you.

Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? (1 Corinthians 6:8)

II. The Criteria for Confrontation

- A. Is it dishonoring to God?
- B. Is it damaging your relationship?
- C. Is it hurting others?
- D. Is it hurting the offender?

Forgive and Forget?

In order for a relationship to be truly reconciled, action is required by both the offender and the offended. The offender must ask for forgiveness, and the offended must be willing to grant it. Those who have been forgiven by Christ must always be ready to grant forgiveness to others who ask (see Matthew 18:25ff). If forgiveness is not sought, the relationship cannot be reconciled. Nevertheless, the offended party must still deal with the matter internally, in order to avoid falling victim to bitterness – the poison we make for another but end up drinking ourselves!

I. The Bible on Forgiveness

I [the Lord] will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.
(Jeremiah 31:34)

As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
(Psalm 103:12)

If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared. (Psalm 130:3-4)

If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.
(Matthew 6:14-15)

[Love] keeps no record of wrongs. (1 Corinthians 13:5)

Forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)

II. What Forgiveness is *Not* ...

- A. Forgiveness is not a feeling.
- B. Forgiveness is not forgetting.
- C. Forgiveness is not excusing.

III. What Forgiveness Is ...

- A. Forgiveness is a promise that I will not dwell on this incident.

- B. Forgiveness is a promise that I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you.

- C. Forgiveness is a promise that I will not talk to others about this incident.

- D. Forgiveness is a promise that I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.

Summary of Biblical Peacemaking

The Four G's of Peacemaking:

- Glorify God – see pages 8-10; 21-25
- Get the Log Out of Your Own Eye – see pages 11-20; 26-27
- Gently Restore – see page 28
- Go and Be Reconciled – see pages 29-30

