

**An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city,
and disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel.**

Proverbs 18:19

We have a crisis on our hands. Today, perhaps more than ever before, there is an epidemic of “cluelessness” when it comes to the Biblical handling of interpersonal difficulties and offenses. While many Christians simply lack the know-how, there are others who have a definite plan of attack (and I do mean *attack*) that is anything but loving. Still others do not possess the willingness to do what is right and best for all. As a result of being poorly motivated and ill-equipped, we not only fail to resolve our problems and heal our wounds, but we also miss the hidden gems of opportunity that abound in conflict.

How well do you manage when you have been hurt by another person? What are your chief objectives in the middle of an offense? What kind of fruit comes from your conflicts? Is God more glorified or more grieved by your words and actions?

To the degree that you learn to appreciate and practice God’s design, you will have a completely different experience and outcome when it comes to hurt, anger, and conflict. Let’s walk through the flow of an offense to better equip you with a Biblical understanding of the dynamics of conflict, as well as the proper ways to handle the pain and the people involved.

WHEN SOMEONE OFFENDS YOU

When someone offends you, you feel pain—pain that God *specifically* and *intentionally* allowed in your life. That pain and the resulting anger and/or grief are purposely designed by your Maker for a reason. These emotions are intended to *motivate* you to do something about this particular problem as well as to recognize and resolve other possible problem patterns in your life.

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Key to Remember

Do not let the pain, emotions, and the offending person control you! (e.g., bitterness, self-pity, gossip, victim-hood, destructive behavior, depression, lack of joy and peace)

When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.

Psalm 73:21-22

Instead, fulfill God's desire by using this emotion/energy to prevail over the critical issues at hand...and in your heart.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:17-18, 21

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that *the testing of your faith develops perseverance*. Perseverance must finish its work *so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything*.

James 1:2-4, italics added

When someone hurts you, the pain you experience informs you of what you already (should) know...that the offender is a self-centered sinner (just like you) who, at least from time to time, thinks of himself before he thinks of God and others. Inevitably, when just one person acts selfishly, many others will be hurt.

For where you have envy and *selfish ambition*, there you find *disorder and every evil practice*.

James 3:16, italics added

Being hurt by someone confirms, yet again, that...*life is not fair!* The offense is another reminder that you should not put too much hope in the performance of people, in the things of the world, or in this temporary life, but, rather, in God and eternity (Ps 37; 62; 73; Matt 6:21, 33; Jn 6:27; 7:37-38; Heb 10:32-36; 1 Jn 2:15-17).

Key to Remember

Our hearts are such that we need frequent prompting to store up treasures in heaven, not on earth—to fix our eyes more on what is unseen and less on what is seen.

Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

Psalm 73:25

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

When you experience pain, it also verifies another truism: *Life is hard!* You *will* suffer repeatedly in this life (Prov 3:11-12; Jn 16:33; Phil 1:29; 1 Pet 4:1-2, 12-14).

Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.

Job 5:7

Try as you might, there is no avoiding pain. It will find you out. The question is not how much pain, but, rather, how will you *handle* the hurt, injustice, unfairness, and offense when it does happen (Gen 50:20; Matt 5:38-48; Heb 12:11c)? Is your life built on the rock or on the sand (see Matt 7:24-27; Lk 6:46-49)? Your response to the offense and the resulting experience will reveal much about the foundational treasures of your heart.

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, *to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart*, whether or not you would keep his commands.

Deuteronomy 8:2, italics added

An offense, thankfully, exposes your weaknesses, idols of the heart, and absolute need for Christ (Deut 8:2-3; 2 Chr 32:31; Lk 8:13; 10:41-43), while opportunistically driving you toward Jesus (2 Cor 1:8-9) and His Word (Ps 119:67, 71). At the same time, an offense teaches you, once again, *the greatest truth of life*—that Jesus (His love, grace, mercy, power) is totally sufficient for you...

But he said to me, "*My grace is sufficient for you*, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10, italics added

An offense reminds you that all people, especially the offender, need continual mercy, grace, forgiveness (see Heb 12:15a), understanding, compassion, and love...just as *you* need and receive from Jesus. The personal affront merely illuminates your need to live in God's New Covenant.

Key to Remember

You, as a believer, pleaded with God to leave the Old Covenant behind—forever—and enter into and remain in the New Covenant. A wrongdoing is no time to back out and attempt to live according to the "the letter of the law" (performance, failure, your own strength), which brings death (2 Cor 3:6). The New Covenant (grace) is not just how we relate to God but to everyone

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else...even our enemies (Matt 5:38-48) especially in conflict (Lk 6:22-38; Eph 4:31-5:2; Col 3:13; 1 Pet 3:8-12).

An offense is a window to your soul. It reveals your character (Ex 20:20; Deut 8:2; 2 Chr 32:31) while uncovering your specific strengths and weaknesses. What is important and highly valued by you is accurately disclosed (Heb 4:13; Matt 6:21). Your desires and motives (Jas 3:16; 4:1-3, Rom 2:7-10), whether selfish or godly, self-seeking or Kingdom-seeking, are ultimately unveiled. An offense tells you who you *really* are (not what others think or what you would like to think) while informing you precisely what you need to change!

Key to Remember

Through conflict, you either regress or progress; you either become more like Jesus or less like Jesus. Being hurt by another is an invaluable and necessary learning experience that is often wasted and, therefore, needs repeating. If you do not learn and grow from this vital information, then you will give up ground to your flesh (you never stay the same in conflict). However, incredible growth and blessings can and do occur whenever you embrace this pivotal truth according to God's design and desire.

An offense ushers in temptation. When we are hurt, we are often tempted to gossip, dwell in self-pity, and exact revenge. Often, the first instinct of our sinful nature is to strike back and inflict pain on the offender, usually with more severity than the original offense. But, if we give in to our fleshly feelings, we will only experience escalating conflicts, deeper problems, and ever-increasing pain.

Key to Remember

Just because you are confronted with the passion of your flesh and the pattern of the world does not mean that this is, in itself, a sin or failure. Everyone experiences this temptation, even Jesus Himself (Heb 4:15). Yet, as always, it is your response to trials and temptations that matters most.

OPPORTUNITIES IN OFFENSE

With all of these things in mind, let's look at some of the specific *opportunities* that an offense provides. However, keep in mind that if the following blessings are not your desire, then you simply will not experience them, especially in the midst of conflict.

Every offense gives you the opportunity to:

- **Change Your Heart - Change Your Life**

You have many opportunities to transform your heart. In changing your heart, you change your relationship with God. In improving your relationship with God, you revolutionize your life!

(See Prov 4:23; Matt 3:8; 7:3-5; Rom 5:20; Col 3:1-4; Heb 12:10-11; 1 Pet 1:6-9; 3:15; 2 Pet 1:3-8)

- **Fulfill Scripture**

There are many principles and promises of God's Word that can be realized in the midst of an offense. For example, conflict is the perfect place to find your life. How? By fulfilling Jesus' words to lose your life so that *you will find your life in Him*. In so doing, you are being conformed more and more to the image of Christ, while being set apart from the ways of the world.

(See Lk 9:23-24; Jn 12:25; Rom 8:38-39; 12:1-2; 2 Cor 3:18; Jas 1:2-4; 4:7-10)

- **Influence Others for Jesus**

An offense is a fork in the road where you make this painful situation either a stumbling block or a stepping stone. You can willingly incarcerate yourself into a chamber of continuous torture, or you can give and re-live the same grace, mercy, and love that you undeservedly and abundantly received from Christ Himself. Choosing the latter can and does have a profound effect on those around you. While you can never change the heart of another, you can make an unforgettable impact by loving like Jesus loves you.

(See Matt 5:13-16; 2 Cor 2:14-16; Eph 4:29-5:2; Heb 12:15; 1 Pet 2:12-15)

- **Store up Treasures in Heaven**

No matter how other people conduct themselves, you can always achieve blessings and treasures in eternity (if not here on earth as well). This eternal focus is precisely what is often lacking in our approach to and understanding of why and how we handle offenses. All conflict and offense produce fruit—of one kind or another. What fruit do *you* produce when offended?

(See Matt 6:19-21; Jn 6:26-27; 15:1-17; 2 Cor 4:16-18; 7:10-11; Phil 1:9-11; 4:10-11; Col 1:10-12; Heb 11; Ps 37:1-11; 73:24-26; 1 Tim 4:7-8)

- **Please, Love, and Glorify God**

Most importantly (yet usually most neglected), you *get to* please, love, and glorify God...no matter what the circumstances and *no matter how the other person responds!* Your appreciation of the vertical dimension is of utmost importance and value in determining your handling of offenses.

(See Mk 12:31-32; 1 Cor 10:31; 2 Cor 5:7; Gal 5:6; Heb 11:6)

All of these godly pursuits are completely within the realm of your ability and responsibility. However, if you tend to fall short of achieving these glorious ambitions, then you need to consider that *maybe these godly objectives are not your primary goals*, at least when it comes to conflict.

CONFLICT AND CHOICE

When an offense occurs, how you respond is always your choice and your choice alone. There are many variables in conflict that may influence your behavior, but ultimately you have total ownership over all of your words and actions.

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Let's first look at the best case scenario. If you have chosen wisely (the way of love and truth), you are in agreement with the psalmist...

I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws.

Psalm 119:30

and Jesus...

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.

Matthew 7:24-25

Ideally, from selfless and godly *love* will come loving *confrontation*. Confrontation, when carried out according to God's desire, will hopefully bring about *confession*. Confession will preferably lead to *repentance*, including the crucial asking for and granting of specific *forgiveness* for specific offenses. If properly followed by both parties, this Biblical model will ultimately result in *reconciliation* of the relationship and glory to God.

If you choose to love, then, depending on the circumstances (Rom 12:18; Heb 12:14), you must confront the other person with his words/behavior/sin (Matt 18:15; Lk 17:3; Gal 6:1; 2 Tim 2:25). And, it is worth repeating, this must be done *in love!* We are to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15; 1 Cor 13:6), not so much for *our* benefit or happiness (Rom 15:1), but for the benefit of the offender, other people, and God (Eph 4:29; Mk 12:30-31; 1 Cor 10:31).

Key to Remember

Resolving the conflict is a goal, but love is the goal (i.e., loving God and others so that God is glorified). You do not control whether or not the conflict is resolved, but you do have total control over whether or not you love.

Your calling is not to change the other person—it is to *love God* and *love others* (Mk 12:30-31; 1 Jn 5:2-3). If your desire/motive is anything less than love, you will experience the fruit of this in your own life (usually worry and anger), as well as in your relationships.

Your hope should be *in God alone* (2 Tim 2:25; 1 Pet 3:5; Ps 62) as He chooses to work in the life of the other person. Your hope is not in the other person or yourself. Your sole responsibility is to be faithful to God's desire and design (Mk 12:31-32; Eph 5:1-2; 2 Tim 3:16-17; Jas 3:12-4:12; Ps 33:16-22; Prov 3:3-6).

Key to Remember

Change is a goal, but love is the goal.

In a perfect world, the offender would take responsibility and confess every time when confronted with a real sin. But this, unfortunately, is the exception rather than the rule. The scarcity of confession explains why so many relationships and lives are in disarray today. As Scripture plainly says...

He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

Proverbs 28:13

However, if the offender confesses (Prov 28:13; Ps 32:1-5; 1 Jn 1:9), ideally he would take the next step and truly repent (“renounce” the undesired conduct and change his thinking, behavior, and heart out of “godly sorrow”/love; 2 Cor 7:10-11; Lk 3:8; Eph 4:22-24). This response, regrettably, also tends to be a rarity.

If the offender confesses his transgression and truly repents, then he should take it to the next level and seek forgiveness, both from you and from God. While there is a shortage of reaching this level, it does happen (particularly in loving relationships). If you want godly relationships then this is what you do!

Key to Remember

The more you practice love, the more you will appreciate and experience all that goes into this process. The more you value God’s design for handling conflict and offenses, the more you will practice and experience love.

A mere “apology” or an “I’m sorry if you were hurt,” does not cut it. You must be sincere and *specific* in your confrontation, confession, repentance, and especially in seeking forgiveness. If you stole \$100 last Friday, then you need to confess, repent, and seek forgiveness explicitly for stealing \$100 last Friday.

Do not say or accept something along the lines of, “I’m sorry if I did something that might have hurt you in some kind of way.” Who wants to hear that? How loving, responsible, or repentant is that kind of attitude? This is more of a slap in the face than it is helpful. It is a prime example of “worldly sorrow” (2 Cor 7:10), rather than one of being genuinely humble, contrite, and loving.

If and when you are able to lovingly advance to this stage, then it is your turn again. You “get to” forgive the offender of the specific offense(s) committed against you. When you do this, you are re-living God’s mercy and grace that He generously gave to you (i.e., the New Covenant).

Key to Remember

It is enormously beneficial, even necessary, to consciously think about and dwell on God’s unmerited gift to you when you are in the process of forgiving another.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. 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.

Ephesians 4:32-5:2

By truly forgiving, you have become more like God and less like the world (“imitators of God”). You have chosen to walk by faith and love rather than temporary gratification and the “Fairness Doctrine” (Old Covenant). You have stored up treasures and glory in heaven no matter what happens here on earth. You have been and will continue to be truly blessed by God (Matt 5: 7; 6:19-21; 1 Cor 3:12-15; 2 Cor 3:5-18; 4:16-18; 1 Tim 4:7-8).

Key to Remember

Conflict is meant to be lived out before God and for God...for His kingdom and glory. However this is often the last thing on our mind in the midst of hurt and conflict.

When all of this is accomplished (by *both* parties), growth and improvement in your relationship should follow. You will have successfully loved each other through a painful, difficult, and often unpleasant process. God, His desire and design, and the other person will have been put above your selves (Phil 2:1-4; 2 Cor 5:15; Jas 4:10). Each of you will know the other's character and love far more than before the offense occurred. Further, as a result of having loved one another Biblically, your relationship, overall, will most likely be better than it was to begin with!

Key to Remember

Offenses are potent and frequent opportunities to love and grow in your relationships, especially with God. Yet, it always comes down to how you decide to handle the offenses.

If, for countless reasons, the process falls through at any stage, *it is still your responsibility to forgive*. It is wonderful when the other person confesses, repents, etc., but do not set your hope on these things happening. Neither does your forgiveness of the other person depend on them (Matt 6:12, 14-15; Mk 11:25).

However, if you turn down the opportunity to forgive, then you have chosen the way of the world (1 Cor 1:18-21; Rom 12:2; Jas 4:4) and the way of the flesh (Gal 5:17; 6:7-8; 2 Pet 2:10). By snubbing God you will experience a deteriorating relationship with Jesus (Matt 6:14-15; Mk 11:25) and the fruit that comes with your defiance, including bitterness, worry, a critical and judgmental heart, poor relationships, depression, despair, loneliness, etc. (Hos 10:13; 2 Cor 7:10b; Gal 6:7-8; Eph 2:3; Jn 10:10a). If you refuse to forgive, in light of all you know, then you have chosen foolishly...

But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice *is like a foolish man* who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and *it fell with a great crash*.

Matthew 7:26-27, italics added

Nevertheless, in spite of your failures, weaknesses, and sin all is not lost—because of God's grace. Yet another opportunity to exercise forgiveness will afford itself to you (Rom 5:20; 2 Cor 12:9-10; Jas 4:6; Rev 2:4-5). Look for where you went wrong (Matt 7:3-5; Lk 9:23-24; Rom 8:5-8; 1 Cor 13:1-7; 1 Jn 4:16-19), repent (Ezek 18:30; Acts 20:21; 2 Cor 7:10-11), and start anew according to God's desire and design (Mk 12:30-31; 1 Cor 14:1; 2 Cor 5:15-17; Gal 5:6; Eph 4:22-24; 1 Pet 4:8; 1 Jn 4:16).

Repeat this process until you have loved and forgiven and, therefore, glorified God.

Further, to the extent you put God's Word into practice, you will be able to withstand any hardship and overcome any problem (Matt 7:24-27; Lk 6:46-49; Rom 8:37; 1 Jn 5:1-5).

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Key to Remember

What you do with the "Word of life" is the key to conflict...and to life (Deut 32:47; Ps 19:7-11; 119; Prov 4:20-24; Jn 6:63; 2 Tim 3:16-17; Jas 1:22-25; 2 Pet 1:3-4)

If necessary (and you will need this if you handle conflict correctly), follow the three step process designed by God for resolving certain interpersonal sin/conflict (see Matt 18:15-17).

Key to Remember

You have one hundred percent control, and responsibility, over whether or not you have loved, forgiven, and have glorified God in the midst of this offense. Zero percent of this depends on how the other party handles themselves...before, during, or after the offense.

What will you choose?

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life.

Deuteronomy 30:11-16, 19-20, italics added