

Ten Reasons Not To Fight With Your Brother

The Epiphany of Jacob



David W. Garrett

The Epiphany of Jacob: Ten Reasons Not To Fight With Your Brother

To my family and friends
who introduced me to conflict
at an early age . . .

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Introduction

It's not about getting justice. Many Christian believers assume when they have been wronged by another believer that the proper biblical resolution is to achieve a solution that is just. That is, they only want what seems fair. Our common sense and the democratic influences of our culture have persuaded us that all we need to do is equal the score to obtain a result that is God-honoring. We need to *balance the scales*, so to speak.

If a contractor, for example, installs a new roof and the owner discovers it leaks, then all the owner needs to prove is that the leaks were caused by the contractor's poor installation. To equal the score the Christian contractor must provide a remedy. He can either refund the money or install a new roof. American jurisprudence and modern mediation is based primarily on this concept of *balancing interests*. All these remedies provide is just an updated version of, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." The biblical solution for resolving a dispute may include the concept of justice or fairness, but it is much more.

When I first set out to write this book I conceived of it as a how-to manual for Christian dispute resolution. I was trained as a lawyer and had been practicing for over twenty years. Every working day for me was another round of resolving my clients' disputes with other people or companies. I became uncomfortable, however, every time someone I knew to be a believer walked into my office complaining about a serious dispute with another believer. Some even demanded I sue! I thought, "*These parties are known in this community as Christians. What would a lawsuit say to the public? How would it look to a judge? Even to fellow believers?*" It didn't feel right. Believers in open and mortal conflict! Moreover, I was having a hard time accepting the idea of Christian brothers and sisters undergoing the stress of litigation with each other. Few sources of anxiety in the hearts of mankind compare to the fear of a courtroom trial.

Eventually, I began to integrate what I was learning in my study of the Bible about conflict processes with what I was dealing with professionally. I determined that *persisting in serious conflict, let alone suing each other, is not at all what God wants for us*. Fighting with each other misses the whole point of redemption! I then set out to articulate how biblical principles and examples could be applied to real-life disputes between Christians outside the courtroom.

The Holy Grail, I speculated, must be figuring out how to set up our own church-based dispute resolution system and then train lay leadership to use biblical dispute resolution principles. However, as I developed the idea for this how-to book a little more, it became clear to me that the focus didn't belong so much on the methodology of dispute resolution but on the biblical goal of dispute resolution; namely, genuine reconciliation between disputing believers. I learned there was still another piece to the puzzle; something very profound.

Christian Dispute Resolution is really about achieving perspective, that is, *gaining a godly perspective about our relationships with each other*. It's not merely about getting justice. It's not even about getting justice using biblical principles. Christian Dispute Resolution is really about discovering the incredible value God puts in our blood bought relationships and the testimony of our reconciliation to the world. God wants us to become reconciled with Him but He also wants us to become reconciled with each other. What's more, not only does God want

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us to have peaceful relationships He wants us to have great relationships with each other. The unity of the saints beckons! That's why Paul asked Christians who were litigating their disputes in secular court in the first century with more than a little exasperation in his voice, "Why not rather be wronged?"

Paul's rhetorical question demanded a personal assessment of their hearts and ours. Do we really want to sacrifice a relationship with a brother or sister for a few dollars? More importantly, do we really want to sacrifice the story of Christ's reconciliation work on the altar of hypocrisy with a lawsuit? Paul took the emphasis off "winning the case" and put it on winning back relationships, and even unbelievers, through our attitudes toward conflict. He challenged the Corinthians to set aside earthy rancor for reunion. He changed the focus from the here-and-now to eternity. He encouraged the disputants to see their conflict not as a personal battle but as a spiritual one. He called them, and he calls us, to keep our disputes out of the secular court system and solve them, if we must, within the family of Christ. Paul asks,

If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers! The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? I Corinthians VI (NIV)

To be sure, while the perspective we have towards conflict might be paramount the methodology we choose to follow resolving conflict in our churches is important too. Christ set forth the methodology he wants us to follow in Matthew 18. I have written a book by the same title, Matthew 18, which you can find at www.icorvi.org which explains the process. We don't have to be passive in the face of conflict. For now, we will just consider our point for view towards it. An encounter between two brothers in the Old Testament illustrates what Paul was trying to say in 1 Corinthians 6 about our perspective. It is found in Genesis 33. Hopefully, you will have an epiphany too as you read this book!

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Prologue

Jacob led the oxen pulling his cart up the far bank of the River Jabbok. The winter rains had not yet come and the river was shallow enough to ford with little difficulty. He was crossing northeast of Jericho on his way south to Hebron, his father's ancestral home. The shallow river was swift but his cart was filled to overflowing with items belonging to his large family. It was also loaded with gifts he hoped to give to his twin brother Esau when next he saw him. It had been twenty years.

Jacob was the last one in his party to ford the river. The others did so the night before and he hoped to regain them. They had taken most of the animals but a small contingent of sheep stayed with him. His family and servants also carried his considerable goods and animal husbandry supplies. Jacob was a rich man.

He remained for the time being on the side of the river opposite the land of his former employer Laban. Somehow he felt safer. He and his employer hadn't always seen eye to eye. Laban was a sheep farmer and had a large operation several dozen days walk to the north. He was also Jacob's uncle and as fate would have it his father-in-law twice over. Crossing the river was a personal challenge for Jacob not so much because of its physical nature but because of what taking such a step meant.

Jacob rested for a few moments by sitting on a rock along the bank of the river. He noticed fish swimming in the shallows and thought how wonderful they might taste. He had feasted and then subsisted on mutton for so many years working in the sheep trade that he thought he may like a change. Jacob shifted his weight uncomfortably. His muscles were tired and his back ached from the inexplicable "wrestling match" he had experienced the night before. The prospect of exerting himself again by butchering an animal for meat dismayed him. What's more, he had a severe pain in his hip which now seemed to affect his ability to move about. He wondered if he even had the agility to chase a beast to make the mid-day meal. Noticing how the ripples played in the currents he decided fashioning a hook on a line and floating it down the river might provide a more satisfying and simple meal.

Jacob's thoughts drifted back to the days when he and Esau were young men in their father Issac's household. Jacob recalled the anger he experienced almost daily about the injustice he felt his culture and his God had dealt him at the time. Jacob and Esau were fraternal twins but because the midwife saw Esau first he was deemed the first born son. Consequently, Esau was to receive the ancestral blessing.

Mother had understood his consternation. Esau was a brute and spent his days hunting and tracking. He was not fit to lead the household his forefathers had built with all of its wealth and influence. Such a legacy from the Most High God more appropriately fell on Jacob with his cultivated sensibilities. Groaning, he shifted his weight again. That's how it should have been, he thought. Instead, he found himself running for his life to his Uncle Laban's household. Jacob had tried to defraud his brother of the blessing and got caught. Though all of these events were in the distant past such family conflict loomed large in his mind. He was now sure his brother

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would harm him when they confronted one another again a few days hence. Why had God ignored him? Or, had this all been part of God's plan from the beginning? He stared down at his wet sandals for a moment. Then his eyes slowly scanned the empty desert horizon. Now at last he thought he knew. Jacob remembered the wrestling match he'd had with a stranger the night before. His lifelong, suppressed anger with God and indirectly with his brother Esau found physical expression during this apparently happenstance contest in the wilderness. Jacob and the stranger wrestled relentlessly all night but neither of them prevailed. In the early morning light Jacob suddenly realized he had encountered someone who could only have been sent from heaven! Just as suddenly, the meaning of God's sovereignty dawned on him. Jacob stood up, stretched his hands to the sky and smiled remembering the moment.

What an epiphany! In an instant Jacob recognized deep down in his soul that it was God's privilege to decide to favor Esau if He so chose. Jacob had experienced a taste of eternity! In a rare moment of clarity he saw things from God's point of view. Jacob learned certain concerns including earthly eligibility for inheritance rights were beyond his control and probably not all that important anyway. Maybe he couldn't manipulate life's circumstances as well as he thought. Some matters were better left to the providence of God. After all, wasn't the earth God's and all that was in it? He had to look for God's hand in these situations. It reminded him of how the Lord blessed him while working at his Uncle Laban's by multiplying the sheep before whom he set the striped branches. Jacob's perspective was now faith driven. His connection with God was what really mattered! What a revelation.

Jacob therefore named the sacred ground where he wrestled Peniel or "Face of God." God even gave him a new name, Israel, because he had struggled with both man and God. That is, he had successfully endured both filial and divine conflict. He smiled again and sat down. It was true! Throughout his long tribulation, he remained devoted to his family. In addition, he continued to honor God and did so regardless of his angst. Jacob now more fully appreciated the reality of his relationships. Wasn't it Jacob that God loved? Jacob's relationship with God would survive the ages of man; not the elaborate tents, pens of animals, and chests of shekels his father possessed which his brother would receive. Even more astonishingly, God would someday make of Jacob a great nation. Meaning came from Jacob's identity with El Shaddai, God Almighty, not Jacob's control of his destiny. He would rely on God's promises. His bond with his sovereign Lord was what really counted. The only question now was how did this more durable, eternal perspective gained by Jacob translate to the lifelong conflict (and the relationship) he had with his brother Esau? He wondered what new epiphany awaited him down the road . . .

Ten Reasons Not to Fight with your Brother: Reason #1

Relationships Are More Important than Fairness

“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

Hammarabi’s Code

“No, please!” said Jacob. “If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably. Please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need.” And because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted it.”

Genesis 33:10-11 (NIV)

“The old law about ‘an eye for an eye’ leaves everybody blind.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Recap of Jacob and Esau

You’ve heard the story in Genesis about how Jacob stole his brother Esau’s birthright from their father? The closest modern day equivalent is inheritance fraud. An example of inheritance fraud occurs when one of the heirs who was named as the executor of the estate decides to "fudge" the paperwork. He commits this wrong to get a disproportionately larger share of the inheritance and thereby defrauds his siblings. No wonder Esau was upset.

Not surprisingly, Jacob then took off in a hurry. He ran as fast as he could to a faraway relative’s home. This relative was his Uncle Laban. Laban ran a sheep farm where Jacob found employment. Eventually, Jacob married and had children. Twenty years passed. The relationship between the brothers was fractured, forgotten, and put on hold. In God’s providence, Esau then decided to go find his brother. Simultaneously, Jacob decided to return home. Their paths were on a collision course. Reconciliation or disastrous conflict was on the horizon. The immovable object would soon confront the irresistible force in the middle of the desert.

What's perplexing about the story is that Jacob also felt "wronged" and thereby justified his actions. You may be wondering how Jacob was wronged. Wasn't Jacob the one who stole from Esau? Yes. But from Jacob's point of view he was also wronged. Jacob may have been saying to himself, "Its not fair. I was born at the same time as Esau. We are twins. Why should he get the birthright? I am wronged by the rules of my culture and the coincidence that Esau just happened to be born a few minutes before me. We were in the womb together. Where is justice? God wronged me! I am more deserving of the birthright!" You will remember Jacob even grabbed at the heel of his brother as they were being born. (Genesis 25:24) My guess is that he had unresolved business with God.

To resume our story, on his way to the “summit” in the desert, Jacob stopped for the evening. He was traveling with his wives, servants, and animals. Jacob sent his family on ahead across the

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Jabbok River, leaving him alone in the encampment. A man came and wrestled with him. They struggled all night. In the morning the man told Jacob his name would no longer be Jacob but Israel because he had struggled with both man and God. Suddenly realizing he had just encountered God face to face, he named the place *Peniel* or *Face of God*. At that moment he resolved his unfinished business with God and God gave him a reminder of it by touching his hip. It took Jacob 20 years away from home and a wrestling match in the desert but he finally came to grasp deep down in his heart two things: the sovereignty of God and the unique nature of relationships He has established for us.

Having confronted God in this way Jacob, now Israel, set off to confront Esau. He then crossed the river, rejoined his family, and went on ahead bearing gifts in hope of placating his brother's anger at their meeting. Their reunion was joyous and tearful. But what was point of the wrestling match at Peniel when it came to Esau?

Jacob likened his perspective at the moment of encounter with his brother Esau with the encounter he had with God while struggling the night before. He exclaimed, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God!" In a sense Jacob's experience of facing Esau was like the memory still fresh in his mind of seeing the face of God the night before. Their twenty-year struggle just evaporated. In its place their relationship, that is, who they were to each other, took precedence. Fellowship was substituted for fighting. No accusations of trickery concerning Jacob's taking of the birthright were made. No defense or justification for it was offered. The scales of justice were not balanced.

What is the lesson of Jacob and Esau? Should we all just wait 20 years after we have been wronged by a Christian brother or sister and then try to reconcile? No, the point is understanding the value of fellowship, genuine fellowship based on our mutual relationship with God. Jacob learned, and we need to learn, that our everyday struggles don't hold a candle to what God has made us to each other. What did Jacob see in the face of God and then again when he saw his brother? Certainly he saw an adversary. Then he saw forgiveness. Lastly, it is probably fair to say he caught a glimpse of eternity and the true value of divinely appointed relationships. Jacob connected his new found value in his vertical relationship with God to his horizontal relationship with his brother.

Likewise, we need to pause and reflect about a supposed Christian adversary before we go into battle: "You are a fellow believer and a member of the family of Christ. The last thing I want to do is compromise the long-term relationship we have because of Christ." Its perspective about a conflict that is closer to God's point of view. This heavenly perspective should drive our decisions not our temporal self-interest. It's about who we are: saved sinners who have been reconciled with Christ and now with each other. We have an identity together and a place in a larger story.

Perhaps you have had your birthright stolen. For example, what about a promotion in a Christian organization due to company politics? What about an unfaithful spouse who ran off with a friend with whom you went to Bible study? What about a lopsided inheritance from your elderly parents due to inappropriate influence from a Christian sibling? What about some bad advice you got from a Christian professional? What about a dishonest partner in a business you pledged to

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run according to Christian principles? What about a temporary loan to a needy family in your church that isn't getting repaid? What about a botched construction job by a Christian contractor? The next time you find yourself in the middle of a struggle will you, like Jacob, see Peniel?

Thanks But No Thanks

Put yourself in the position of the "wronged" person in the following story based on a real-life situation. What would you do? Let's say you are an affluent businessperson. Your company asks you to relocate to another state for a year to develop a new business division. You agree to move but don't want to sell your house here because you know you and your family will be moving back. It occurs to you that you could turn this situation into a ministry opportunity.

You approach your pastor and ask if there are any young families in the church that need accommodations at reduced rent for a year. The pastor exclaims, "It must be providential!" and introduces you to a young man and his family who are recent converts. "This young man just lost his job with a construction firm and his house to foreclosure. He needs someplace for him and his family to live for a year and would be willing to provide remodeling work in exchange for the rent," the pastor states with enthusiasm. You wonder why the young man lost his job but rely on the pastor's credibility and the warm glow of compassion you feel overtaking you.

The year passes. The new division you set up in the other state is a grand success, and you decide to move home. You contact the young man living in your home with the news and inquire about the remodeling work. He says, "Well, we made some progress. Just need another week." Concerned but hopeful, you drive over to the house. You turn down your street and pass him leaving your driveway with a car full of quickly packed suitcases. You inspect the house and discover to your chagrin that virtually no work has been done and the place is a mess. What do you do? What are your options? Who is to blame? The young man? His family? The well-intentioned but naive pastor? Yourself? God? What is just? What is fair? What is Christian?

Well, you could sue the young man. He didn't pay anything nor did he do the remodeling work. It would only be *just*. After all, you didn't receive the benefit of the bargain, did you? Alternatively, you could sue the pastor. You relied on his representations and credibility. Wasn't he a "guarantor?" At a minimum you could exercise your influence with the board to get him into a lot of trouble. Quite irresponsible. Or, you could rail at God for a while. "Here I try to do ministry and this is what happens? Isn't God supposed to make things come out fair when my heart is right?" Finally, you could blame yourself. "What a dope! I shouldn't have been so trusting. God wants me to use my head too, doesn't He? Maybe I should have checked up on them."

It occurs to you in your despair as you survey the overflowing garbage cans in the kitchen that there might be more options. You could do nothing. Just ignore it. Better yet, you could turn this into an opportunity to scowl at the pastor and the young man, when you see them at church, with a look of holy disapproval. Or, maybe you could play the martyr. Boy, you could feel good about that one. See how you suffered for Christ! What guilt and heaps of coal you could dump on their

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heads. *I just won't speak to them, you think. I will wait for them to come to me. I am prepared to wait for years if I have to.*

What do you do? Really. Maybe this is a test from God. You muse, *Maybe God is trying to teach me something here.* Your eyes trace the lines of ripped wallpaper on the dining room wall, *What does God want me to do?*

The Contentious Ants

Have you ever heard the fable of “The Contentious Ants?” Once upon a time there was a young boy with extremely acute hearing. If he concentrated just right he could hear just about anything; the sound of wings folding behind a butterfly, the scratching of moles underneath the surface of the lawn, the chattering of squirrels high in the trees. This boy’s hobby was observing ants. Every day he would go into his backyard to look for new anthills and ant colonies. He loved to squat and watch them. He also loved to listen in on their conversations. The ants never noticed him high above the volcanoes of dirt they were building. If they had, they would have been terrified.

One day he found a particularly interesting anthill. Endless processions of teams of ants were bringing bits of debris and pieces of leaves from the nearby area into the anthill. The young boy focused in on two particular ants that were carrying a section of a leaf and tried to hear what they were saying. It seemed that one of the ants excelled at walking backwards with one side of the leaf and the other excelled at walking forward. In that fashion they scurried across the field carrying their load. An argument ensued about who should be carrying which end of the leaf. The boy concentrated and tried to listen in on the conversation.

“I do not like carrying this end of the leaf. It does not suit me. I want your end of the leaf. Please turn the leaf so I can carry that end,” declared one ant.” No, I won’t. This end suits me just fine,” said the other. On they went bickering and disagreeing but making progress all the time. Listening in on their arguing, at long last the boy whispered in exasperation, “Why are you arguing. You are both ants from the same hill. I can see thousands of you doing the same thing right now. One end of the leaf is no different from the other. Don’t you see you are moving the leaf in the same direction regardless of who is holding either end? Please stop struggling with each other.”

May God help us to develop a heavenly perspective about such struggles. Aren’t we also moving the leaf in the same direction? Then we will see our relationships are more important than achieving fairness or justice.

Ten Reasons Not to Fight with your Brother: Reason #2

God Forgave Us First

“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

Colossians 1 (NIV)

“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.”

2 Corinthians 5 (NIV)

“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

Colossians 3 (NIV)

I had a case years ago defending an individual who ran a farm supply store in a small rural town. He owned the only such store for miles and had a loyal clientele. One day he was charged by the county prosecutor with cheating his customers. He admitted to doing the crimes and awaited sentencing hoping for leniency, so he could return to his store. He planned to mend his ways and continue to serve the community. Most of his customers also wanted him to get probation rather than jail time so the store wouldn’t be closed.

At sentencing before the judge, several local people who had been victims of the store owner’s cheating spoke up on his behalf. They said the storeowner was remorseful and therefore deserved forgiveness and a light sentence. The judge listened and agreed. On his release, the storeowner returned to his store and continued to operate his business. He nevertheless decided to figure out the name of the stool pigeon who brought his fraudulent conduct to the attention of the prosecutor. When the storeowner learned the name he decided to stop letting this person shop at his store. Though he was shown forgiveness by the court, he did not in turn show forgiveness to the stool pigeon.

How like the story of the stool pigeon is the concept of peer-to-peer reconciliation. The judge forgave the storeowner and would have been disappointed to learn the storeowner did not forgive the stool pigeon. God forgives us and is undoubtedly disappointed when He learns we do not forgive each other.

Perhaps you have observed others make the sign of the cross by moving a hand through the air up and down and then side to side. This gesture is an excellent reminder of the nature of our two most important relationships. We are encouraged first to be right with God and then right with each other. God first reconciled us with Himself by means of Christ’s sacrifice. He no longer counts our sins against us. He forgave us. So also, must we now forgive each other and be reconciled as Christian brothers and sisters.

The reality of this truth is a humbling mandate. We must reconcile with each other because Jesus reconciled us with God. We must forgive because He forgave. When it comes to interpersonal

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Christian conflict, this truth substitutes the merits of Christ's work for the merits of legal arguments. It disarms our bravado based on the strength of our battlefield tactical positions. The overwhelming value of Christ's redemptive work for us dwarfs the value of our weapons of justification against each other. Consequently, not only does Paul tell us to forgive, he also instructs us to "make allowance for each other's faults."

The Lesson of the Poor Man's Lamb

Nathan the prophet came to King David to ask his advice. He told the story of a rich man and a poor man who each raised sheep. The rich man had many more lambs, however, than the poor man. What few lambs the poor man had he loved and cared for like his own children. One day the rich man took the poor man's favorite lamb and roasted it for his guests. Nathan wanted to know what sort of punishment the rich man should receive. David was outraged. He demanded the rich man repay the poor man four lambs for the one he stole. The rich man had so many blessings. He should be giving lambs away, not taking them!

Are we not often like the rich man? Here, God gives us all of the riches of heaven in Christ, including forgiveness of our sins, and we hesitate to give our own poor brothers and sisters our forgiveness. Instead, we *take* rather than *give*. What ungrateful hypocrites we are when we obsess about obtaining justice from a wrongdoer! We are like spoiled grade school bullies on the playground.

To finish Nathan's story, you will recall God anointed David king of Israel and Judah. He also gave him the house and wives of Saul. What does David do? He wanted more. He coveted the poor man's lamb. David stole Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers. What's more, he cleverly facilitated the death of Bathsheba's husband to accomplish the theft. No wonder God was upset with David. He was given everything, still wanted more, and reciprocated nothing in gratitude. Because David "despised" God in this way, God warned him that the sword would be a constant threat to his family.

Paul says in Colossians, "*Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*" Note that our forgiveness of a wrongdoer is not conditioned on what the wrongdoer does. We forgive solely because God forgave us. The same truth appears in the Lord's Prayer. Our forgiveness of others stems from God's great gift of forgiveness of our own sin in our utter unworthiness. Consequently, we must confront the reality that we may, in some instances, find ourselves wronged without so much as a word of apology let alone restitution from a wrongdoer. We do not retaliate because in a larger sense we were forgiven "first."

Perhaps you have been unsuitably ungrateful to God for His forgiveness of you. Have you "despised" his goodness? Are you quick to forgive, and do you appreciate the reason why you should forgive? Do you hold grudges? Is there anyone you are not talking to? Is there anyone who makes you cringe when you hear his or her name? Is there anyone who took advantage of you? When you feel this way will you, like David, remember the lesson of the poor man's lamb?

Ten Reasons Not to Fight with your Brother: Reason #3
God Blesses Loving Empathy Toward Wrongdoers

“Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

1 Peter 3 (NIV)

“If you judge people, you will have no time to love them.”

Mother Teresa

Have you ever experienced a flash of intense anger? I remember once pulling into a gas station at the end of a long, hard day to fill up my tank before heading home. I was moving along at a steady but weary pace, almost coasting toward a place to the right of the gas pumps. The gas station was very busy because it was rush hour, and there were a lot of vehicles coming and going.

Just then a pickup truck screamed into the gas station parking lot, cut me off, and took the spot next to the gas pumps I was coasting toward. At that moment a surge of adrenaline rushed through my system, energized me, and before I knew it I had hopped out of my still-moving car and was headed full tilt toward the perpetrator of my undeserved delay. Oh, the injustice of it all. Clearly, the spot was mine. Any idiot could see my vehicle was pulling into the refueling bay just as a NASA shuttle craft docks at space lab circling the earth. I paused as I drew nearer to my prey, but not before I exhibited a primitive but nevertheless derogatory salute at him. I was immediately embarrassed and disappointed with myself. Returning to my car, I couldn't believe I did something like that. You probably can't either. But I did. The point of this illustration is to say that our instinct when wronged will invariably be to repay evil with evil.

Peter's Toolbox

In his first letter the Apostle Peter anticipates the typical response to an evil such as badmouthing and exhorts us to do what is counterintuitive. He tells us not to retaliate. Instead, he encourages us to pay back with a blessing. Peter goes on to mention three attitudes he would like us to have toward each other in the midst of conflict. The reality of coexisting with other Christians is that we will have disputes from time to time. He wants us to be prepared for it. He tells us to love each other with tender hearts and humble minds, to be full of sympathy toward each other, and to be of one mind. All of these attitudes require that we cultivate sensitivity about how our fellow believers are thinking and feeling.

First, we must love each other. In doing so, we must get into each other's hearts and heads, so to speak. A tender heart is less callous and can more easily sense the often-hidden underlying foundations of a particular conflict. A humble intellect will listen more readily and not think it has all the answers. Second, we must show sympathy. Conflict often creates terrible wounds. We must learn to share each other's pain. Third, we must be of one mind. That is, we must look for areas of agreement and build on them.

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With God's help, if we can successfully develop these three attitudes in our lives we can avoid knee-jerk retaliation and instead help ourselves and others exhibit a godly response to being wronged. Always keep in mind, however, that you need more than just these three attitudes or tools from Peter's toolbox. You need the help of the divine carpenter.

"My companion attacks his friends; he violates his covenant. His speech is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart; his words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords. Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.

Psalm 55 (NIV)

Innocent Motives Misunderstood

There were three couples who were good friends. They attended the same church, socialized often, and went on vacations together from time to time. One day one of the women said something that could have been construed as inappropriate toward one of men who was not her husband. The man's wife overheard the comment. She became jealous and suspicious. The social activities stopped. The man's wife developed a great deal of anger and started to slander the woman as unfaithful. The slandered woman lost her job in a Christian bookstore as a result. She threatened to hire a lawyer. The third woman, in an effort to reconcile the parties, tried to act as a mediator. Ironically, both women became distrustful of the loyalties of the woman who was trying to mediate between them. Both women wondered what confidences were being revealed. The woman who was mediating eventually persuaded the slandered woman not to sue but ironically lost both friends as a consequence of her efforts, even though she did nothing wrong and had the best of motives.

Perhaps you have been wronged because your innocent motives have been misunderstood. Have you had a helpful suggestion misinterpreted? Has gossiping twisted what you really meant? Have you ever felt unfairly misunderstood and thereby prevented from plugging into the group of fellow Christians? Have you ever been badmouthed? Have you ever been slandered? When you feel this way, will you try to remember Peter's encouragement to show loving empathy toward the perpetrators? Take the initiative. Deal with your enemies with loving empathy. Be prepared to do so even if it means being wronged. If you pay them back with a blessing, Peter promised God will then bless you.

Ten Reasons Not to Fight with your Brother: Reason #4

Two Wrongs Don't Make a Right in Trusting Relationships

“What loneliness is more lonely than distrust?”

George Elliot

“You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.”

1 Thessalonians 2 (NIV)

“Men take more pains to mask than to mend.”

Benjamin Franklin

In his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul recalls a visit to the city of Philippi where he had a bad experience. It seems he and his companions had been insulted and had even suffered injury at the hands of unreceptive listeners. The context implies that part of the reason their message to Philippi may have been rejected is mistrust of their motives.

Mistrust of motives is often a basis for conflict. Paul went to great pains in his letter to demonstrate why his and his companions' motives were appropriate. He wanted the Thessalonians to consider for themselves. Did we use flattery? Did we look for praise? Were we a burden to you? Did we take advantage of our position as apostles? Did we not work day and night to show we were self-supporting? The answer was obvious. Perhaps Paul was concerned that unsubstantiated rumors from Philippi may have reached the Thessalonians.

Paul then goes on to tell the Thessalonians how important his relationship with them was to him. He says, *“We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.”* Clearly, communicating the gospel was important to him but so also was his connection with them personally as brothers and sisters.

Fast Food Fable

I hate to admit it but I got lunch yesterday by going through a drive-thru fast food restaurant. The “menu adviser” at the inanimate but very appealing kiosk requested my selections. I hate fries. I went to great pains to pre-advise my menu advisor that I did not want a “combo” meal so I would not receive that abominable fried potato food product. I then ordered a cheeseburger and soft drink. The next question, of course, was, “Did I want that in a “combo?” I replied that I did not, somewhat irritated. The menu advisor then asked, “Did I want fries with it?” Well, I don’t have to tell you what happened next. I was caught in that inexorable dilemma. Should I say something and risk an unanticipated additive to my beverage or should I hold my tongue? I opted for the latter and gleaned a lesson for this chapter. How does sincerity of heart play into this whole mix of our relationships with each other and conflict? Why is it worth being wronged for?

Unmasked Fellowship

As I mentioned, Paul was seeking fellowship with the Thessalonians. He wanted to share his life with them. God wanted this fellowship to be genuine. We know God wanted sincerity because Paul said God “tests our hearts.” God was evidently evaluating whether or not Paul and his companions were trying to please him or men.

One way to avoid being misunderstood by deceptive people and therefore “please them” is to be as deceptive as they are. Paul could have played the game, masqueraded, as it were. He could have resorted to flattery or trickery to avoid the conflicts at Philippi. In fact, by his own admission he could have profited by using a “mask to cover up greed.” I ask you, *Isn’t this kind of deception the same thing we hear about in the newspapers about fraud in big business and even at the highest levels of our churches and Christian organizations from time to time?* Think about the lawsuits that flow from those occasions! Instead, Paul “was like a mother caring for her own children.” What an incredible picture of *unmasked fellowship* is a mother caring for her own children! No illusions or fraud there. Nothing is as pure and honest as a mother’s love. What’s more, children see right through phoniness and deceit.

Therefore, when we play games of deception with each other then it is apparent our fellowship isn’t genuine. Two wrongs don’t make a right in trusting relationships. Otherwise, we risk seeming only as sincere as my “menu advisor.” The menu advisor simply followed a script. She really didn’t hear what I was saying. Her heart and mind were only half engaged. What’s more, her smile and thanks seemed disingenuous. While I can take such pretense in the occasional outing to the local fast-food place I cannot take it in Christian relationships. I need to know that people mean what they say. I don’t want to second-guess them. I don’t want to have to watch out for the spin. My guess is you do not either. I would rather be wronged by a sincere but mistaken fellow believer than fooled by a smiling backstabber. Moreover, I don’t want to respond to deceptiveness by using deception myself, even if it makes life easier. Do two wrongs make a right? Shouldn’t we just agree to permit the wrong?

Notice the juxtaposition of Paul’s message of the gospel and Paul’s love of the Thessalonians. Both involve reconciled relationships; reconciliation with God and its corollary of reconciliation

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with each other through the gospel. Both were jeopardized by mistrust of motives. Paul wasn't about to compromise either relationship by answering a wrong with another wrong. A deceptive response disregards Christ's work and is hypocrisy for the reconciled church. Wouldn't we prefer unmasked fellowship? Are we trying to please men or God? It's all about godly integrity in our relationships.

Have you ever wondered whether or not you should play the game? Have you resorted to spinning a story to defend yourself from half-truths being spread about you? Have you ever used flattery to gain the trust of others who you believe had misplaced loyalty to someone else? Have you ever played the game of "politics" in your church or Christian organization? Credibility is the ship we must navigate as we attempt to relate as believers. It may even mean remaining wronged in conflict in some instances. May we remember the lesson of the *mask* in Thessalonians both when we encounter Christians who practice disingenuous interaction and when we decide how to return our responses.

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Ten Reasons Not to Fight with your Brother: Reason #5

The Battle is Spiritual Not Personal

“The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already.”

1 Corinthians 6 (NIV)

“Stand united, singular in vision, contending for people’s trust in the Message, the good news, not flinching or dodging in the slightest before the opposition. Your courage and unity will show them what they’re up against: defeat for them, victory for you—and both because of God.”

Philippians 1 (Msg)

“We shall divide and conquer them.”

Julius Caesar

Perhaps you have seen ancient battle scenes reenacted in movies or on television. For example, you may have watched one where a Roman army lining up for battle opposite barbarians out on the frontier of their empire. The Romans first throw flaming boulders into the middle of their opponents’ procession. Then, to further “soften them up,” huge volleys of arrows are loosed. Next, the Roman infantry moves as one person directly into the center of the barbarians’ front line clustered under interlocked shields known as the *turtle*. This classic military technique breaks the enemy line at the now-weakened center point and divides it into two or more splinter groups. The Roman cavalry then sweeps around both sides and annihilates their now-divided and therefore weakened and disorganized opponents.

Would this military technique not be an excellent one for our enemy, Satan, to use? If he was trying to defeat the church, the bride of Christ, what better way than to attack the church on its front line and split it? Better yet, what if Satan got vast numbers of people in the church fighting with each other? Divide and conquer! How insidious that would be! Yeah, that’s it. Start little conflicts between believers here and there, and before you know it, very few of them are communicating in a genuine way, let alone advancing the cause of Christ. We are in disarray. My guess is this technique is one that Satan is using and has been using for a very long time. Satan is certainly cleverer than the most capable Roman general and probably has made many refinements on the classic technique.

In Ephesians 5 the apostle Paul provides a picture of how relationships should work. He particularly describes relational interaction between husbands and wives, children and parents, and masters and servants. He gives pointers on the merits of respect, love, obedience, hard work, and attitude for these relationships to work in unity. In Ephesians 6, Paul then uses a military metaphor to describe the battle that we, “as God’s people” must fight. There is no room for disharmony. Unceasing prayer for each other is essential. Like a general addressing his troops assembled on the battlefield before the fighting begins, he inspires us with the following encouragement and last-minute direction:

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood,

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but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.”

Ephesians 6 (NIV)

When we realize that much of our conflict with fellow believers may well be a manifestation of the larger spiritual battle underway, the personal element of conflict should subside in importance in our minds. We should be more willing to be wronged because we know it only serves Satan’s interests when we retaliate, escalate, or perpetuate. The battle is spiritual not personal. It even serves Satan’s interests when believers nourish conflicts that the “deceiver” himself did not create or facilitate. The question we should not ask is, “What can I do to show I am right?” It is, “How can I keep my response to this wrong from playing into Satan’s hands?” And, “How can I direct my response to fit with God’s intentions described in the Bible for the church?” And finally, “How can I turn this conflict situation into an opportunity for genuine unmasked fellowship?”

Election Battles

Permit me an illustration from contemporary American politics. Let’s say it’s time to elect another president. Contenders from within each of the two major parties are quibbling. This infighting escalates as the time draws nearer to nominate the two primary candidates. Democrats are fighting Democrats and Republicans are fighting Republicans. Representatives from each party sling larger and larger globs of mud at each other. Hostility grows between members of the same party. Alliances are broken. Backs are stabbed.

Then, at last, that moment arrives. The votes are tallied at the respective party conventions, and the nominees and their running mates are finally announced. All of the infighting stops. Peace reigns. Quietness ensues. Formerly bitter rivals now throw their unified support behind their party’s nominee for president. All conflict is forgotten in the face of a larger purpose: to support the party’s nominee for president against the other party’s candidate. Democrats abandon their disputes with other Democrats. Republicans abandon their mutual disagreements as well. Now, the Democrats and Republicans line up on the political battlefield and square off against each other.

The moment the infighting stops in the presidential primaries parallels, at least in one respect, the moment Christ reconciled us with each other with his work on the cross. Yet many believers fail to recognize the analogy. Like the American and Japanese soldiers still fighting on remote islands months after the Pacific war ended in World War II they don’t know the battle has already been won. There is no basis for infighting anymore. The Bible says we have been reconciled with each other. Now, we must unify and move forward in a common purpose. More importantly, we must line up together on the spiritual battlefield opposite Satan and his host of “principalities, powers, rulers of darkness of this world, and against spiritual wickedness in high places (KJV).” More than just a mere election for president of the United States, this war fills the universe.

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Have you missed the big picture? Have you ever thought, “I’ll get that person if it’s the last thing I do!” Or, have you ever said, “I don’t care what I have to pay my lawyer. It’s personal now.” May God give us the insight we need to see conflict for what it often is: a landmine on the spiritual battlefield. And remember, landmines sometimes mean casualties. You may find yourself wronged.

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Ten Reasons Not to Fight with your Brother: Reason #6
A Proper Response to Conflict Enlarges Faith.

“Sometimes I think we’re alone in the universe, and sometimes I think we’re not. In either case, the idea is quite staggering.”

Arthur C. Clark

“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

1 Corinthians 13 (NIV)

Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don’t try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well developed, not deficient in any way. If you don’t know what you’re doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You’ll get his help, and won’t be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought. People who “worry their prayers” are like wind-whipped waves. Don’t think you’re going to get anything from the Master that way, adrift at sea, keeping all your options open.

James 1 (Msg)

A few evenings ago I was driving down a two-lane road with my fifth-grade daughter. Curious about the rules of the road (since in her mind she would soon be eligible to get a driver’s license), she asked, “What side of the road are you supposed to drive on, Daddy?” I replied half engaged, “The right side.” She responded, “Then how come those people driving toward us are on the left side?” Bewildered momentarily, I said, “They are on the right side.” She replied determinedly, “No they’re not. We are on the right side and they aren’t!”

What’s true? Does the truth depend on your point of view? Were the headlights coming toward us from vehicles driving on the left-hand side of the road? Or, were they merely driving on the right-hand side of the road from their perspective? Does this prove truth is relative? No, it only proves the label “right” can be used for people traveling forward on an American road. It has nothing to do with whether or not someone crossed the centerline and caused a head-on collision. Right-hand sides of the road have always existed and can always be determined. That’s a reality accident victims never dispute.

The same is true for eternal truths about reality found in Scripture. You can’t pick and choose what is truth, and what is not, based on how you see it. Either these realities are true, or they are not. Thereafter, you both accept and believe them or you do not. If you do believe, the consequences are enormous. Among these eternal truths are the following realities (however imperfectly I may have expressed them):

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1. There is a God.
2. God created the heavens and earth, the rules that govern them, and all that is in them.
3. God created people in His own image, which makes us special in creation.
4. We have nevertheless broken God's rules and continue to do so, and therefore we fall short of God's holy approval.
5. We cannot redeem ourselves and must, without further intervention, be punished because of God's holy nature.
6. God loved us so much that He intervened in our history and sent Himself to earth in the person of His Son to redeem as many of us who will trust in Him.
7. God's Son is Jesus, and the history of His visit is recorded in the Bible.
8. Jesus will return to earth again, claim those who have trusted in Him, and allow punishment of those who have not.
9. With the help of the Holy Spirit the primary purpose of those who trust in Jesus is to love and enjoy God and each other and to "bear fruit" through good works with gratitude in His name until He returns.

How then does conflict enlarge faith? If we really believe this stuff which makes up our faith, our attitude toward conflict changes in incredible ways. For example, no longer do we cling so tightly to our possessions. God created and gave us our possessions. He can give us more if we need them. Fighting for our possessions somehow doesn't seem so important. Also, when our time is wasted by a troubled fellow Christian, it doesn't matter. Our time horizon is eternal. In addition, if our reputation is damaged without good cause by a wrongdoer we take comfort in the fact God sees us for what we truly are.

President's Day Discount

Let's say you are the general contractor in the following situation based in part on a real life dispute. You have several employees. One of your employees wants to build himself a home using your connections to suppliers and subcontractors. He also wants to do it at cost. You think, "No problem. He has been a good employee. He is a fellow believer and goes to the same church I do. He has a young family. I can forego the profit on this one."

He provides you with an estimate of what he thinks it will cost to build. You execute a contract with him at that cost. He starts construction. However, after a while you notice he is spending a great deal of company time on his home. Moreover, he has several cost overruns due to ineptitude on his part. You overlook it, thinking he will settle up for the extra costs later. You also warn him not to spend so much company time on his personal objective of getting his family in the new house by President's Day. The cost overruns total close to \$30,000.00.

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Your young employee persists in spending company time on his project. You mention the cost overruns, and he changes the subject. You are becoming angry but bite your tongue. At last President's Day arrives and the house is done. You breathe a sigh of relief and help him move in. You expect the next day he will come back to work full of gratitude and raring to catch up on his work. Instead, you receive a letter of resignation.

Evidently, your young employee had been interviewing with other competitors and found a company that would pay him more money. Outraged, you contact your church leadership and complain about his Christian principles. Not knowing (or fearing) what to do next, church leadership does nothing. You learn your now-former employee is spreading rumors about what an unethical and incompetent employer you were. Moreover, he talks about how hard you made him work with such little time off for his young family. And to top it all off, he also calls you unpatriotic about President's Day.

What do you do? What is the proper response? How will your response help you expand your faith? Can our faith truly be built in the crucible of conflict?

Well, you have to decide first if you are willing to walk away from \$30,000.00 for your convictions. It may necessary to do so. Will you do it? How much would you pay to prove you really believe what you say you believe? Would you, like so many saints before you, sacrifice your life if called upon? Just wrestling with yourself about this question is a real faith-builder.

Here you are, you muse, an established businessperson secure with your family and friends. You are well known at church. You believe yourself to be a mature Christian able to withstand the wind-whipped waves of trouble and circumstance. Your opponent, on the other hand, is a new believer. He and his family are "little lambs" vulnerable to becoming disillusioned with the whole church thing. What's more, his new mortgage is pressing him financially. He is struggling for every dime.

Still, this foolish young man chose to leave your company. In fact, there is little question in your mind that he took advantage of you. He has \$30,000.00 of your money. You know you could make one call to your lawyer, and he would crush this guy in court. Right is right, isn't it? None of your friends would fault you.

Will your forego the lawsuit? Will you try the biblical path? Are you willing to have your faith enlarged? It may even mean being willing to remain wronged, if necessary, in conflict. You can ask for God's help. As James says when we experience challenges, "*So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well developed, not deficient in any way. If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought.* (Msg)." May God expand our faith and our horizons so we can please him with our responses to relational conflict.

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Ten Reasons Not to Fight with your Brother: Reason #7

Christ Also Experienced Wrongs

“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

Romans 8 (NIV)

“Always do right. This will gratify some people, and astonish the rest.”

Mark Twain

“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.”

Philippians 1 (NIV)

Suppose you are the senior pastor of a larger church in a medium sized city. Suppose further that you have a twin brother who is a local city councilman and a lawyer. Your brother has always been the black sheep of the family. However, in recent years he began going to church and has cleaned up his act. You are both very well known and respected in your community. Your parents also live in the same community, are retired, and are wealthy former business owners. You and your twin brother stand to inherit a substantial amount of money.

Add to this mix of circumstances the fact you have triplets in twelfth grade. All of them hope to go off to expensive private colleges at your expense next fall. In addition, you just found out your wife has a rare cancer. Her condition is worsening. Happily, there is a university hospital in a nearby state that has a promising experimental treatment. Unfortunately, your health insurance won’t cover it. Finally, you just agreed to take a pay cut with your church board to help offset cost overruns from a recent building program you spearheaded.

If that wasn’t enough, you just received word that your parents, who were returning from a short-term missions trip, were in a plane that crashed in the Indian Ocean. There were no survivors. Your twin brother was “close” to them emotionally, almost too close. Sadly, you and your parents were going through some relational turbulence at the time.

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You learn your brother was named executor of your parents' estate in the will. Coincidentally, he was the one who drafted the will. You read it and are confused by its ambiguity. You think back to the reasons your twin brother was always considered the black sheep of the family. The reasons revolved around issues of integrity. What a "talker!" He could sell knitting needles to nudists. You worry about his administration of your parents' estate. Will he be fair? Boy, could you use that money. Your wife has cancer, your triplets are going to college, and you just took a pay cut.

Then, you open the mail. You receive a letter from your brother, the lawyer, about your parents' bequests. It seems your brother believes the will gives him the bulk of the estate. Tax reasons ostensibly. Your parents didn't want to worry you with the details. You find a check in the envelope for much less than you expected. The money is certainly not enough to pay for your wife's treatment let alone next year's triple tuition.

You slump down in your seat despondent. How unfair! What an amazing confluence of circumstances. Where is God in all this? Here you are, a senior pastor, and you are perplexed. Should you rush out and hire your own lawyer? Or, should you passively await the suffering that will certainly come when you must tell your wife you can not afford the medical treatment she needs or when you must tell your children you can not send them to college as promised? If you decide to file a lawsuit at the courthouse downtown to contest your twin brother's conduct, you know it will wind up in the newspaper. You can see the headlines, "Christian Pastor Sues Brother the City Councilman for Stealing from Parents' Estate." What a field day the "News at Six" would have on TV.

Trusting-Obedience

Christ suffered. The Bible says He suffered because He obeyed His Father. In fact, He obeyed all the way to death. What does Christ's suffering have to do with our suffering? What does Christ's suffering have to do with our conflicts?

"While he lived on earth, anticipating death, Jesus cried out in pain and wept in sorrow as he offered up priestly prayers to God. Because he honored God, God answered him. Though he was God's Son, he learned trusting-obedience by what he suffered, just as we do."

Hebrews 5 (Msg)

In the words of the writer to the Hebrews, we learn "trusting-obedience" by our suffering. Certainly, criminals suffer for their crimes. Adulterers suffer for their adultery. Is this suffering as Christ suffered? Certainly not. Where is the virtue in suffering for getting caught stealing or cheating on your spouse? How does this please God? How does this teach us "trusting-obedience?" The virtue in suffering and its relation to conflict must have something to do with what precipitates the suffering. As Peter says,

"For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God."

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To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."

1 Peter 2 (NIV)

Consequently, it is clear according to Peter that by following in the footsteps of Christ we will suffer for doing what is right. God will then bless us for it. It is equally clear that we will not be blessed for suffering by doing wrong. Any decision we make must therefore be guided by obedience to God. We must do "good," as Peter says.

When we encounter a conflict situation we must evaluate our potential responses and ask, "How will this response fit into God's will? Are there any possible courses of action that I know God can bless? Are there any I know he will not? Are there any courses of action I know violate Scripture? Are there any that fit?"

Christ did his priestly duty and followed through in trusting-obedience all the way to the cross. He was an example to us. Often suffering and conflict go hand in hand. Sometimes we will be called upon to suffer in conflict when a course of action that could relieve us of the suffering runs counter to obedience. We may think we can relieve the stress and find a solution by running to the lawyer's office, but this remedy may not be consistent with God's will, particularly if conflict with another believer is the source of the stress. We must learn to follow Christ's example of trusting-obedience.

The Cap on the Fizz

Having been involved in a great deal of litigation I have learned that usually one thing slows the intensification of a lawsuit if nothing else does. That one thing is money. Litigants will keep on fighting until they run out of money. Sooner or later they will not be able to pay their attorneys, hired "experts," or other court expenses. Money is the "cap" on the fizz. In the believer's case, our Christian principles "cap" us. We don't sue each other out of principle. We obey the Bible's instructions in 1 Corinthians 6 and instead trust in God to see us through conflict. We may suffer as a result, but so did Christ. We will learn trusting-obedience as we suffer. Paul doesn't leave the Corinthians, and he doesn't leave us without options, but he does place this one clear limitation: stay out of secular court when it comes to disputes with other believers.

Have you ever been tempted to run to the lawyers? Have you ever felt so anxious about a situation that you would compromise any principle you have been taught in church since childhood to relieve yourself of it? Have you ever rationalized aggressive conduct that compromised your reputation as a Christian? Be ready to be wronged! May God teach us to look to Him moment by moment in trusting obedience as we tiptoe through the frontiers of painful conflict that each of us will surely stumble into one day.

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Ten Reasons Not to Fight with your Brother: Reason #8

Properly Managed Conflict Develops Discernment and Patience

“There is no education like adversity.”

Benjamin Disraeli

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight.”

James 4 (NIV)

“Poor is not the person who has too little, but the person who craves more.”

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

“Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

Romans 5 (NIV)

Have you ever been peeling potatoes and discovered a rotten interior in one? Did it surprise you to find something else under the skin than what you expected? Prognosticating about what is under the surface of the apparent is “discernment.” Below the surface of an otherwise placid stream might be a torrential undercurrent. It takes discernment to recognize indications of deeper, swifter water. Likewise, it takes godly discernment to sense accurately the reality of the deeper waters in the human heart. What is really powering our desires? James provides us with guidance on discerning which “wisdom” is motivating us.

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”

James 3:13-18 (NIV)

James identifies two kinds of what he describes as motivational wisdom in this passage. The first wisdom is “earthly.” We can recognize it in others and ourselves. For example, if we see our fellow believers causing trouble with others, then discernment tells us to be on the lookout for possible jealousy under the surface. Being motivated by jealousy is earthly wisdom. Moreover, if we sense our own heart is full of bitter jealousy then discernment tells us watch out lest we brag or lie to cover up truth. In other words, beware of self-deception, or concealed jealousy in our hearts may lead to trouble.

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The second kind of motivational wisdom is “from heaven.” We can also recognize it in others and ourselves. For example, if we see our fellow believers acting peacefully, then discernment tells us to be on the lookout for “harmony qualities” under the surface. These qualities include a desire to be “*pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*” Being so motivated finds its source in heavenly wisdom. Moreover, if we sense “peace” in our own relationships discernment tells us to look to credit the “harmony qualities” as the undercurrent. To summarize, where you see conflict look for “jealousy.” Where you see the absence of conflict look for the “harmony qualities.”

Note that James rather cryptically states at the end of this passage, “*Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.*” Our natural instinct might lead us to believe the reverse is true. We suppose, “When we have justice then we will have peace.” However, it seems James is trying to tell us that if we are motivated by wisdom “from heaven” we will exhibit the desirable characteristics he mentioned. Thereafter, these characteristics, the stuff of harmonious interpersonal relationships, will result in “justice.” Peace leads to justice, not justice to peace. Dealing with conflict on a group level therefore starts on an individual level. We need to discern what is going on in each other’s hearts. Exercising this discernment sometimes takes patience and careful observation.

Consider the following biblical examples of how jealousy caused conflict. Didn’t David’s jealousy lead him into deadly conflict with Bathsheba’s husband? What about Joseph’s brothers when they discovered Jacob their father had given Joseph a new coat? How about Cain and Abel? Or, Jacob and Esau? Saul was certainly jealous of David’s popularity. Ananias and Sapphira wanted admiration for their donations, did they not? The list of biblical characters is lengthy.

One more thought about jealousy. Isn’t jealousy just another manifestation of that nagging feeling of discontentment which stems from unchecked worldly desire? Left to our own devices, wouldn’t all of us prefer to be someone we are not or have something someone else has? Worldly desire does not originate with God. To obey God we must turn our backs on it. As John says,

“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”

1 John 2 (NIV)

Other Causes

Remember that jealousy is but one example of “rotteness” under the skin that can cause conflict. There are many others. The challenge is figuring out which example of rotteness we are dealing with. The reasons for rotteness are probably as numerous as the variations of sin. Among these are pride, greed, idolatry, deceptiveness, and unfaithfulness. Paul says,

“So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of

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rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.”

Galatians 5 (NIV)

In addition to sin, simple misunderstandings often cause disputes. Misunderstandings usually revolve around inaccurate or incomplete information. The problem might merely be an “apparent” dispute, not a real one. Also, the inadvertent uncovering of old wounds can cause conflict. Metaphorically speaking, for example, hugging someone with broken ribs can hurt. So can innocent but apparently compromising conduct discovered by a spouse who was cheated on in a previous relationship.

Training Ground

How then does managing conflict develop our discernment and patience? Why does our agreeing to be wronged help us do so? Again, Paul says,

“There’s more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we’re hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. “

Romans 5:3-4 (Msg)

The answer is that “trouble” is the training ground for these qualities of character. They grow with use. In time, we will find ourselves thoroughly prepared to wait upon God patiently with discerning alertness in the midst of conflict “for whatever he will do next.” Our instinct, of course, is to retaliate rather than to agree to be wronged and wait on God. However, instead of engaging in conflict when we are wronged, we need to develop the ability to understand a quarrel’s underlying basis with the help of Scripture and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Obedience will more easily follow. We can then live lives that honor the Lord. As a side benefit, the “crucible of conflict” not only develops our own maturity in these areas but it makes us into believers who can help other believers understand and deal with disagreements.

“For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.”

Colossians 1 (NIV)

Looking Under the Hood

Once upon a time there were two families living in a subdivision. Both attended the same church. The dads worked on the same “line” at the local factory and earned similar incomes. The kids from these families went to school together and got similar grades. If that wasn’t enough, the families enjoyed the same kinds of recreation and therefore often vacationed together. The moms

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dressed their kids in clothes from the same stores and furnished their homes with the same grade of quality. While the families experienced the usual ups and downs of life in suburbia, they were essentially happy. They were bringing their kids up right, attending church, and preparing for retirement.

One day the White family got news. “Dad” was to receive a substantial promotion and a significant raise. The Green family did not get the same news. Overjoyed, the White family immediately made plans to move to another subdivision that was a little nicer. It was still close enough, however, to the old subdivision to remain in daily contact with the Green family. The Green family tried to share in the joy of the White family, but privately they began experiencing uncomfortable, unfamiliar feelings.

The promotion went into effect, the paycheck became larger, and the Whites moved into their new home. To celebrate, the Whites invited the Greens over for dinner. Mrs. Green brought a house-warming gift she bought at a favorite store that she and her friend used to patronize. Mrs. White tried to accept it graciously but the quality of the gift was not what her new neighbors had given her the day before. She therefore smiled meekly and muttered a “thank you, you shouldn’t have.”

Dinner was more lavish than what the Green’s were accustomed to on visits to the Whites. Between bites, and sometimes during bites, the Greens commented repeatedly about the great volume of food Mrs. White had prepared but to Mrs. White’s chagrin overlooked the quality of it. Conversation after dinner was sparse and uncomfortable. The things the dads could formerly discuss about work were limited and strained. The things the moms could discuss about shopping and caring for their children had also narrowed. By the end of the evening Mrs. Green could take it no more and exclaimed, “That was the worst meal I ever had.” Mr. Green for his part shouted, “What a waste of food. You made enough to feed twenty missionaries.” The Green kids putting in their two cents whined, “We want the desserts you used to give us.”

Surprised by this very uncharacteristic conduct, the Whites sucked the air right out of the room in astonishment. “Wha-a-a-a-a-at!” they exclaimed, “I think you folks better go.” The Greens then filed out to their car and headed home in silence. The next day Mr. White, wearing his new manager’s outfit, visited Mr. Green on the factory line. “You remember our deal with the riding lawnmower?” asked Mr. White. “Well, I no longer need to share it with you so I want you to buy me out.” Mr. Green replied, “Hey, I wasn’t the one who chose to leave the neighborhood. Why should I have to buy you out?”

One thing led to another, and before you know it Mr. White was in his lawyer’s office inquiring about suing his former neighbor and friend. Mr. Green, for his part, was with his union representative asking about filing a grievance against management for harassment unrelated to employment. Their mutual pastor was flabbergasted that two such good friends could be at such odds with each other over such insignificant matters. You are suing your best friend over a lawnmower? You went to union officials for that! He did not discover until much later after investigating the “undercurrents” that the real basis for the hostility was the jealousy about the promotion.

Have you ever been bewildered by conduct you have observed? Have you ever wondered why certain people have acted the way they have? Have you ever thought to look “under the hood” to see what might be motivating them? Are the reasons someone gives for pursuing conflict the real reasons? May God give us discernment to understand why someone might be trying to “pick a

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fight” and patience to endure it when they do. Then, as Paul says in Romans 5 we will be “alert for whatever God will do next” (Msg).

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Ten Reasons Not to Fight with your Brother: Reason #9

The Bible Discourages Initiating Lawsuits Against Fellow Believers

“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court.”

Matthew 5:25 (NIV)

“If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints?”

1 Corinthians 6:1 (NIV)

In 1 Corinthians VI Paul strongly discourages Christians from suing each other. Paul's comments could be applied equally well to lesser wrongs as well as ones which could be litigated, however. One reason Paul seems to be concerned about our filing lawsuits against each other in a court of law is our collective public testimony. In a simple lawsuit one party asks a court of law to decide the winner of a dispute. Paul's hesitation is that such a request to a secular authority and its concomitant public exhibition of the conflict is detrimental to our testimony. His reason seems to be more than merely “public relations” related, however. Public displays of conflict are undesirable because conflict is contradictory to the reality of what we are in Christ. Not only does conflict send the wrong message it *is* the wrong message.

Our true message to the world is quite the opposite of conflict and disharmony. It is the message of relational peace; that is, reconciliation between God and us and reconciliation between each other. The basis for such reconciliation is the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. The Son of God came to earth, lived among us, died on a Roman cross, and rose again to life to redeem us from sin and give us life eternal. Sin separated us from God and from each other. By suing each other we invalidate the redemptive work of Christ to the world. It is hypocrisy. We are supposed to be telling the world how we have been reconciled to God and to each other through Christ, not exhibiting conduct that is the antithesis of it in the municipal forum.

I asked my seventh grader to describe for me what hypocrisy was to him. He thought it was like that feeling you might get if you saw your Sunday school teacher leaving the betting booth at the race track. The teacher's conduct doesn't match up with the content of his or her teaching. Likewise, exhibiting our disunity by initiating a civil lawsuit is evidence of behavior which is inconsistent with our beliefs in reconciliation and unity. Suing each other is therefore hypocritical. It compromises our collective public testimony.

For Testimony's Sake

While the Bible strongly discourages initiating civil lawsuits against known fellow believers this prohibition does not necessarily mean you may not defend yourself if you have been sued by another believer. It is also arguably inapplicable in administrative or procedural court matters such as insurance, probate or workers compensation law. Another possible exception to the prohibition on Christians litigating with each other is divorce. I say possible because there are different opinions about what the Bible says about this topic within contemporary Christian circles. Anyone confronted with a divorce situation should investigate these opinions carefully

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paying special attention to where the great weight of Christian scholarship rests on it. Matthew 5:31 seems to leave the door open to it in certain limited circumstances such as marital unfaithfulness. Nevertheless, there are instances where Christians who believe they have a legitimate biblical basis for divorce choose instead to stay in the marriage for testimony's sake. In still other instances, there are believers whose spouses have left them who have chosen not to remarry as an example of Christian conviction to others.

I am reminded of a particularly pungent divorce situation in the western part of the United States I learned about through a friend to illustrate the point. I have changed some the facts to protect the innocent but have not detracted from the basic story. A successful airline pilot left his wife after 30 years of marriage to pursue a relationship with a coworker. He decided since his children were out of the house he no longer owed his wife any obligation. Moreover, since his wife had not worked in a "real" job while staying at home raising their 4 children he felt entitled to virtually all of their considerable marital estate. This included the lovely family home in which they had lived. While the wife did not work outside the home she did have a small but growing ministry to young mothers. She declined to defend herself during the court proceedings believing that her participation in an acrimonious divorce might disillusion some of the young mothers many of whom were new Christians. Instead, she professed her reliance in God's protective hand.

True to form, the husband and his attorney asked for and received from the court most of the marital estate including the family home. She was evicted shortly thereafter and lost all of her furniture to the buyers. In God's providence the couple who purchased the home turned out to be believers and offered the now divorced wife the opportunity to live in the small basement apartment of the home at a reduced rental rate. Not having any marketable skills other than her ability to run her small ministry she suffered considerable financial distress not even being able to buy bare necessities. Suffering the humiliation of living in the basement of her own home she cried out to God.

As it happened, the president of a very influential Christian organization had taken notice of her small ministry. He offered her the opportunity to fold her ministry into the larger organization and find employment there. I understand she has now found her place in the larger ministry where her talents and gifts are wonderfully used. Her own ministry to young women with children has grown to a size she could never have imagined when she cried out to God in that basement where she was demonstrating her faith. In retrospect she now sees God's blessing. In her case, had she participated in the litigation she may have disillusioned "the little lambs" in her fledgling ministry. Moreover, she may have sabotaged potential reconciliation with her ex-husband if he ever came to his senses. She lived her belief that mere earthly possessions had no eternal value by staying out of the property settlement litigation. Finally, she may never have experienced the joys of participating in the larger ministry. As part of her continuing ministry to young mothers she resolved not to remarry anyone but her ex-husband as an example to these young women about the sanctity of marriage. Marriage is not something to be jumped into and out of lightly. To her, relationships were paramount.

Anytime we are confronted with a possible exception to the prohibition on lawsuits between each other we must remember that the doctrinal basis for this fundamental religious belief we share must never be ignored. We as Christians sacrifice the reconciliation work of Christ on the altar of hypocrisy when we sue each other in public court. Our decisions must be made in light of this principle.

The Currency of Heaven

In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus gives us a glimpse of what the true currency of heaven might be. Both Lazarus and the rich man died and went to their eternal destinations. The rich man went to Hades to live in torment. Lazarus went to heaven. The formerly rich man looked into heaven and saw Lazarus there by Abraham and asked, “Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.” Abraham replied, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.” The roles reversed but the currency was not the same.

Notice that Jesus did not say, “Now Lazarus is rich and you are poor.” Instead, Jesus highlighted the contrast in relationships. Lazarus had been gathered to the bosom of his father Abraham and was being comforted, and the formerly rich man was all alone in eternal torment. He could not “cross over from there to us.” The currency of heaven (or thing we value most) may well be relationships. It is certainly not money, for money was the thing the rich man most valued. It bought him splendid clothes and enabled him to live each day in luxury, but only for a relatively short time. Lazarus’s relationships will go on for ever. Will you compromise your relationships with a lawsuit? Will you tell the world by suing your brother you do not believe you are reconciled with him for the long haul?

Question of Qualification

A second reason Paul discourages public lawsuits seems to relate to the question of *qualification* to decide issues between Christian disputants. Unbelievers are not adequately qualified to decide civil matters of conflict which have more than temporal ramifications. In other words, how can someone whose time horizon with us may be only 70 years decide an issue between persons who will spend eternity in heaven together? Moreover, how can such a person reasonably resolve a matter when heavenly justice may have a whole different set of presuppositions? For example, how can a Christian wrongdoer be justifiably ordered by a secular court to pay financial damages to another Christian whose future holds a stroll on streets paved with gold? The compensation is ultimately worthless to him. The currency of heaven will be different from mere money. We negate our public testimony about our future hope when we presume to seek recourse in earthly sums from spiritually unqualified persons.

Let me put this concept in its personal context. If you suffered financial injury at the hands of another believer would money ever fully compensate you? It may help in the here and now but does such a remedy miss the point? For example, if another believer breached a business contract with you, and an earthly court ordered him to pay you \$10,000.00, would that *really* be the end of the story? Does the secular court read the same book or have the same hope?

Judging Angels

A third reason Paul discourages public lawsuits relates to his perception of the nature of “judging” itself. As he describes it the exercise of judging by believers may have a loftier spiritual quality. I imagine I have read 1 Corinthians 6 a thousand times. Until recently, I glossed over the part about “judging angels” and “judging the world.” I assumed that such a concept would be more fully revealed to us when we got to heaven. However, I think I can

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venture several reasonable speculations about the kind of “judging” Paul is talking about and a conclusion about what it means to our litigating in secular court.

To begin with, judging angels and the world may well involve evaluating particular situations which are disputed by two or more parties. It may not necessarily mean judging parties individually and conclusively as God might in the Great White Throne Judgment. Paul asks, “*Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels?*” The context seems to infer actual situations in the hereinafter involving multiple parties. Second, such judging may include the objective of finding a solution for these parties. Isn’t the context of the passage pragmatic in nature? Third, if this judging does involve particular situations then justice will probably not involve “balancing interests” since the currency of heaven will not be money as previously discussed. Instead, it may somehow involve the heavenly mosaic of our relationships. Fourth, this judging may involve evaluating particular situations in some way against the work of Christ. After all, Christ is the ultimate reference point for judging everything, isn’t he? As Paul says of Jesus,

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

Colossians 1 (NIV).

Consequently, if we will someday judge the particular situations of angels and the world in this fashion then this judging must have more than a temporal earthly nature. It has heavenly and eternal import. If we will be thus capable someday how then can we sue each other now in a worldly court? Even more important, as Paul asks, are we not capable of judging ourselves in the things of this life? I like the Amplified’s version of 1 Corinthians VI on this point,

“Do you not know that the saints (the believers) will [one day] judge and govern the world? And if the world [itself] is to be judged and ruled by you, are you unworthy and incompetent to try [such petty matters] of the smallest courts of justice? Do you not know also that we [Christians] are to judge the [very] angels and pronounce opinion between right and wrong [for them]? How much more then [as to] matters pertaining to this world and of this life only! If then you do have such cases of everyday life to decide, why do you appoint [as judges to lay them before] those who [from the standpoint] of the church count for least and are without standing? I say this to move you to shame. Can it be that there really is not one man among you who [in action is governed by piety and integrity and] is wise and competent enough to decide [the private grievances, disputes, and quarrels] between members of the brotherhood, But brother goes to law against brother, and that before [Gentile judges who are] unbelievers [without faith or trust in the Gospel of Christ]?”

1 Corinthians 6 (The Amplified Bible)

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Would you publicly dishonor Christ's message with inconsistent behavior? Would you dare to put your concerns before the spiritually unqualified? Would you miss your opportunity to practice your God given ability to biblically conciliate disputes between believers; an ability that may someday be extended to disputes between angels? Are you really willing to remain wronged, if necessary, to so demonstrate your faith? May God give us the grace.

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Ten Reasons Not to Fight with your Brother: Reason #10

Willingness to be Wronged is a Prerequisite to the Reconciliation Process

“Why not rather be wronged?”

I Corinthians VI

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.”

James 1

“I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.”

Philippians 4:2

Paul’s probing question to the Corinthians who were engaged in conflict was, “Why not rather be wronged?” Such a question is like a crossing guard at a busy intersection holding up a stop sign so children can pass safely. It makes us stop in our tracks for a moment and think. It bores down to our deepest perspectives, principles, and beliefs. Until we have actually evaluated our hearts, we are not properly ready to do Christian Dispute Resolution.

Christian Dispute Resolution is not just another way to “win.” It is not merely a legitimate biblical means to the same earthly end. It is an adventure in faith. It is an opportunity. As James says, *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.* Where the adventure may lead you do not know. In fact, you must confront the reality that you may not win. Instead, you may be called upon to remain wronged.

Unintended Victims of Unresolved Conflict

I recently learned from a friend about a seemingly tragic situation for several believers who were the unintended victims of conflict. Please note some facts have been altered to protect identities. A rapidly growing church in the southeastern part of United States decided to hire someone to help it implement good stewardship procedures in its back office. A Christian businessperson from another part of the country learned about it. He was told that this church was specifically trying to hire a well qualified highly degreed individual from the business world to go into full time Christian work as its business manager. He had an MBA degree, many years of experience in business, and a heart for ministry. He applied to the church and was hired. He gave up a very substantial income and moved his family across the country. Unbeknownst to him the senior pastor on the staff was having an affair with one of the church secretaries.

As it happened the affair became known and the two individuals were suspended without pay. Political battle lines formed in the church about what to do with the errant employees. Should they be fired or embarked on a path of restoration? The senior pastor was responsible for hiring the new MBA. Consultants were hired to advise the church what to do. Their advice was to fire not only the pastor and secretary but also the balance of the church staff including the MBA. The thinking was to “clean house” and start over. Also, any successor might want the opportunity to handpick his own staff. The church followed the advice.

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Unfortunately, this advice put the MBA in a tight spot. He had “burned his bridge” with the former employer. He had moved his family across the country and purchased a new house. This transition into ministry had cost him tens of thousands of dollars. What could he do? Sue the church? Would he recruit the other former employees on the church staff to join him in the lawsuit? They did nothing wrong. All of these employees had been repeatedly promised lifetime employment by the old pastor so long as the church could employ them.

Here’s what I understand he did. He asked the former church staff to meet with him to discuss their options. Rather than pitch a lawsuit he pitched biblical principles. Approaching the newly designated pastor on behalf of the group he asked the pastor to give strong consideration to rehiring all of the non-involved staff except him. His argument was that the new pastor should see clearly that his pitch for the group was not motivated by his own self interest but by biblical principles. Such an offer astounded the new pastor and gave him impetus to review the biblical principles the MBA was relying upon. It so impressed him that he hired virtually all of the old employees back one at a time and then referred the matter of rehiring the MBA to the church board. This referral gave the MBA an opportunity to talk about reconciliation principles to the board and led to the start of restoration for the old pastor and secretary. Unfortunately, the board declined to rehire the MBA due to budgetary constraints which occurred because of the scandal. He was the unintended victim of conflict. He and his family suffered severe financial loss but accomplished wonderful things for the kingdom of God.

What does it mean to be to willing to remain wronged? *It may mean being wronged!* Sometimes God may call upon you to experience the consequences of a broken world as His Son did even though you did not deserve it.

The Motivating Force

You have now reviewed ten biblical and practical reasons to be prepared, if necessary, to be wronged in the face of conflict rather than retaliate. If your heart is so prepared then you are prepared to participate in Christian Conflict Resolution. Remember, it’s not about justice nor is it even about getting justice relying on biblical principles. It’s not about the “steps” or methodology used though the method is important. It’s about our hearts. It’s about godly perspective. It’s about our testimony of reconciliation. And, it’s about the very personal investment God made in our blood bought relationships purchased by His Son.

The motivating force we should aspire to and earnestly pray for when we approach a conflict situation is being driven by a heavenly perspective; not an impetus for justice, compromise, or even fairness. We need to see conflict from God’s eternal point of view. If you are ready and want information on how the biblical process of works please read the book I have written entitled, Mathew 18: How to Help Resolve Conflict. It is based on Christ’s instructions to us in Matthew 18 and Paul’s in 1 Corinthians 6. You can find out how to get it at www.icorvi.org.

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Epilogue

Jacob resumed his journey to meet his brother Esau in the desert. Traveling now was slower and more painful because of the tenderness in his hip. Every time he felt a twinge it reminded him of the fateful wrestling match he'd had a couple of evenings before. He wouldn't trade it for all the rare spice in the east, however. Jacob had learned a life changing lesson. Achieving justice when wronged is not a "right." That is, "fairness" as people perceive it is not valuable in and of itself to be demanded at all costs. No, it turned out there was more. Jacob paused a moment to rest his aching body. Confronting the "man" in the wrestling match showed him certain concerns including earthly eligibility for inheritance rights were beyond his control and probably not all that important anyway. Maybe he couldn't manipulate life's circumstances as well as he thought. He had learned at long last that some matters were better left to the providence of God. After all, wasn't the earth God's and all that was in it? He had to look for God's hand in these situations.

Lifting his eyes to the horizon Jacob noticed the stirrings of a sand storm. The wind was increasing. The small company of sheep following close behind him had become nervous and agitated. Jacob wondered about his family. They had gone on ahead of him. However, their pace was slower even with the issue of his hip and Jacob believed he would regain them by the end of the day. By the looks of it, his family was probably in the middle of the gathering storm.

Quickening his pace, Jacob grinned ironically to himself. How like the coming storm was his relationship with his brother. He didn't ask for the conflict with Esau about the inheritance. It just happened. Now, Jacob was about to confront his brother. He experienced a sudden burst of panic as he thought about the damaging sand-laced winds and about the anger of his brother he would soon encounter.

Jacob rearranged his cloak to protect his head and neck. As he made progress in catching up with his family the intensity of the sand storm had increased. It had been blowing violently for several hours. Now he could see his kin off in the distance nestled in the scrub behind a rise. Small wonder they sought protection. Jacob's entourage consisted of his growing family, servants with their families, and his livestock with young. While his progeny were numerous they were also vulnerable. He wondered who Esau would be bringing. Jacob's chest tightened. It was hard to breath. His cloak kept out most of the sand but it didn't keep out his growing fear. In the grip of his trepidation Jacob now did what he always did. He hatched a plan. As he walked on, he turned it over in his mind several times evaluating his brothers possible responses. Merging finally with his entourage he delivered his sheep into the care of his servants and sought out his wives and children. The winds continued to roar and his beasts were grateful as was he for the protection of the scrub behind the rise. Jacob's plan was to offer his brother Esau gifts in hopes of placating him. He would involve his family in this scheme and he needed to prepare them.

Esau, too, had noticed the scrub behind the rise. He was making progress coming up from the south. The land was flat for many leagues and the rise stuck out against the horizon. Though he and his company were not suffering the storm for it was off in the distance Esau thought it best to

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head that way. Esau knew his brother would be headed down from the north and would probably look for the protection of changes in the topography as all good travelers did.

The morning brought calm to the desert. The desert birds returned in the cool of the day and began their songs. Jacob got up as did his family and closest servants. Without starting the cooking fires, they climbed first to the top of the rise. Looking south they saw what could only be considered a large group of people and wagons headed north. The dust concealed any detail. However, the assemblage was unmistakably human. They seemed almost military in their progress. There had to be several hundred men judging by the length of the column. Excitement and then fear gave way on each family members face. Off in the distance were their kinfolk. Would they be friendly and would they be foes? At his families urging, Jacob recounted the story of his lifelong conflict with his brother yet again and then reviewed with his family his plan for reconciliation with Esau.

Jacob's plan, as previously recounted, was to send gifts. Some of his servants speculated based on Jacob's story that he wanted to show Esau he never really wanted their father's wealth to begin with. Just the responsibility which being the oldest carried. Others speculated Jacob was trying to buy Esau's affection. Jacob was manipulating his circumstances by cultivating avarice in his brother. What a surprise. Still others thought the gifts were a sign of respect, an acknowledgement of Esau being the "oldest" and leader of the clan. Finally, two of the older servants who had been around for awhile conjectured that Jacob was just exhibiting a middle eastern custom for greeting a respected personage; paving the way for a successful "welcoming" as it were.

Naturally, the gifts would be need to be valuable. What was valuable to Jacob and anyone else he thought was livestock. Jacob made plans to send his family in small groups each one bringing herds of sheep along, one after the other, to Esau. Wave after wave of gifts would arrive. Hopefully, by the time Jacob appeared Esau would be so "softened up" he would forget about the conflict. Jacob hesitated no longer. With an odd mixture of apprehension and filial sentimentality in his heart Jacob gave the signal and the plan was implemented. The first group departed from the protection of the scrub behind the rise. Others soon followed.

What happened next was something unexpected. Esau breached protocol. He didn't wait for the last of the gifts to be presented along with their giver. Instead, Esau got off his stool, ran to Jacob, and embraced him. Jacob attempted to bow low seven times in respect but was interrupted with a big family hug. Both brothers wept with joy.

At that moment Jacob experienced something remarkable. He exclaimed to his brother, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God." In an instant of divine synergy Jacob connected the significance of his vertical relationship with God to the significance of his horizontal relationship with Esau. A second epiphany had occurred for Jacob. First was his discovery of God's sovereignty. Second, was his discovery that our temporal self-interest doesn't hold a candle to the value we should put in our relationships with each other. An inexplicable peace came over Jacob. Closing his eyes briefly Jacob breathed a prayer of thanksgiving to El Shaddai. The inheritance issue seemed silly now. A wave of filial love coming over him Jacob hugged his brother again and insisted he keep the livestock as genuine brotherly gift. The gift

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itself meant little monetarily to Esau, of course, with all of his wealth but for Jacob it was a gesture of his new godly perspective and the new selflessness he had discovered in himself. He could now “Let go, and let God.”

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