

An aerial photograph of a mountain range with a river valley. The mountains are rugged and covered in dense vegetation, with a river winding through the valley. The text "Preparing for Conflict" is overlaid on the image.

Preparing for

Conflict

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## **Table of Contents:**

Forward		3
Chapter 1	Preparing for conflict	4
Chapter 2	Do not maintain anger.	10
Chapter 3	Forgive those who have a complaint against you.	14

## Forward

Conflict in the body of Christ is crucial and must be resolved.

Avoidance of conflict, with no effort to resolve it, postpones a proper response and exacerbates the problem because conflicts that are allowed to remain unspoken will often increase and have negative effects on relationships within the body.

Unity is the goal of conflict resolution and poses a threat to the devil who will use every opportunity to take advantage of unresolved issues, especially those involving anger, bitterness, self-pity and envy.

Unsolved emotions are the basis for most church conflicts. Scripture tells us that we're to "let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from [us], along with all malice" (Ephesians 4:31).

Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of malicious behavior.

Failure to do this results in division in the body of Christ and grief to the Holy Spirit. We're also told that we're not to allow a "root of bitterness" to spring up among us, leading to trouble and defilement (Hebrews 12:15). Clearly, a biblical method of conflict resolution is needed.

### **Hebrews 12:15**

Look after each other so that none of you will miss out on the special favor of God. Watch out that no bitter root of unbelief rises up among you, for whenever it springs up, many are corrupted by its poison.

Without conflicts resolved, soul winning will not likely take place.

## Chapter 1

### Preparing for conflict

#### Matthew 18:15

"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.

These are Jesus' guidelines for dealing with those who sin against us. They were meant for

- (1) Christians, not unbelievers,
- (2) Sins committed against *you* and not others, and
- (3) Conflict resolution in the context of the church, not the community at large.

Jesus' words are not a license for a frontal attack on every person who hurts or slights us.

They are not a license to start a destructive gossip campaign or to call for a church trial. They are designed to reconcile those who disagree so that all Christians can live in harmony.

When someone wrongs us, we often do the opposite of what Jesus recommends. We turn away in hatred or resentment, seek revenge, or engage in gossip. By contrast, we should go to that person *first*, as difficult as that may be. Then we should forgive that person as often as he or she needs it (Matthew 18:21-22). This will create a much better chance of restoring the relationship.

**The tongue of the wise brings healing.**

**Proverbs 12:18**

There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

**Love does not demand its own way.**

**1 Corinthians 13:4-7**

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged.

It is never glad about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

Our society confuses love and lust. Unlike lust, God's kind of love is directed outward toward others, not inward toward ourselves. It is utterly unselfish. This kind of love goes against our natural inclinations.

It is possible to practice this love only if God helps us set aside our own desires and instincts, so that we can give love while expecting nothing in return. Thus the more we become like Christ, the more love we will show to others.

## **Be quick to hear and slow to speak.**

### **James 1:19-20**

This you know, my beloved brethren but everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.

When we talk too much and listen too little, we communicate to others that we think our ideas are much more important than theirs. James wisely advises us to reverse this process. Put a mental stopwatch on your conversations and keep track of how much you talk and how much you listen. When people talk with you, do they feel that their viewpoints and ideas have value?

These verses speak of anger that erupts when our egos are bruised—“*I am hurt;*” “*My opinions are not being heard.*” When injustice and sin occur, we *should* become angry because others are being hurt. But we should not become angry when we fail to win an argument or when we feel offended or neglected. Selfish anger never helps anybody.

## **Speak only words of edification**

### **Ephesians 4:29**

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

## **Love with a tender heart.**

### **1 Peter 3:8-11**

Finally, all of you should be of one mind, full of sympathy toward each other, loving one another with tender hearts and humble minds.

Don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate when people say unkind things about you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God wants you to do, and he will bless you for it.

For the Scriptures say,

"If you want a happy life and good days,  
Keep your tongue from speaking evil,  
And keep your lips from telling lies.  
Turn away from evil and do good.  
Work hard at living in peace with others.

Peter lists five key elements that should characterize any group of believers:

- (1) Harmony—pursuing the same goals;
- (2) Sympathy—being responsive to others' needs;
- (3) Love—seeing and treating each other as brothers and sisters;
- (4) Compassion—being affectionately sensitive and caring; and
- (5) Humility—being willing to encourage one another and rejoice in each other's successes.

These five qualities go a long way toward helping believers serve God effectively.

Peter developed the qualities of compassion and humility the hard way. In his early days with Christ, these attitudes did not come naturally to his impulsive, strong-willed personality (see Mark 8:31-33; John 13:6-9 for examples of Peter's blustering).

But the Holy Spirit changed Peter, molding his strong personality to God's use, and teaching him tenderness and humility.

In our fallen world, it is often deemed acceptable by some to tear people down verbally or to get back at them if we feel hurt. Peter, remembering Jesus' teaching to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), encourages his readers to pay back wrongs by praying for the offenders.

In God's kingdom, revenge is unacceptable behavior, as is insulting a person, no matter how indirectly it is done. Rise above getting back at those who hurt you. Instead of reacting angrily to these people, pray for them.

### **Show God's love by reacting with grace.**

#### **Matthew 5:38-42**

"You have heard that the Law of Moses says, 'If an eye is injured, injure the eye of the person who did it. If a tooth gets knocked out, knock out the tooth of the person who did it.'

But I say, don't resist an evil person! If you are slapped on the right cheek, turn the other, too. If you are ordered to court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too.

If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow.

God's purpose behind this law was an expression of mercy. The law was given to judges and said, in effect, "Make the punishment fit the crime." It was not a guide for personal revenge (Exodus 21:23-25; Leviticus 24:19-20; Deut. 19:21).

These laws were given to *limit* vengeance and help the court administer punishment that was neither too strict nor too lenient. Some people, however, were using this phrase to justify their vendettas against others. People still try to excuse their acts of revenge by saying, "I was just doing to him what he did to me."

When we are wronged, often our first reaction is to get even. Instead Jesus said we should do *good* to those who wrong us! Our desire should not be to keep score, but to love and forgive. This is not natural—it is supernatural. Only God can give us the strength to love as he does. Instead of planning vengeance, pray for those who hurt you.

To many Jews of Jesus' day, these statements were offensive. Any Messiah who would turn the other cheek was not the military leader they wanted to lead a revolt against Rome. Since they were under Roman oppression, they wanted retaliation against their enemies, whom they hated.



But Jesus suggested a new, radical response to injustice: instead of demanding rights, give them up freely! According to Jesus, it is more important to *give* justice and mercy than to receive it.

By telling us not to retaliate, Jesus keeps us from taking the law into our own hands. By loving and praying for our enemies, we can overcome evil with good.

The Pharisees interpreted Leviticus 19:18 as teaching that they should love only those who love in return, and Psalm 139:19-22 and Psalm 140:9-11 as meaning that they should hate their enemies.

But Jesus says we are to love our enemies. If you love your enemies and treat them well, you will truly show that Jesus is Lord of your life.

This is possible only for those who give themselves fully to God, because only he can deliver people from natural selfishness. We must trust the Holy Spirit to help us *show* love to those for whom we may not *feel* love.

## Chapter 2

### **Do not maintain anger.**

#### **Ephesians 4:26**

Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath:

It is important to handle our anger properly. If vented thoughtlessly, anger can hurt others and destroy relationships. If bottled up inside, it can cause us to become bitter and destroy us from within.

Paul tells us to deal with our anger immediately in a way that builds relationships rather than destroys them. If we nurse our anger, we will give Satan an opportunity to divide us. Are you angry with someone right now? What can you do to resolve your differences? Don't let the day end before you begin to work on mending your relationship.

### **Be honorable in all things.**

#### **Romans 12:17-21**

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do your part to live in peace with everyone, as much as possible.

Dear friends, never avenge yourselves. Leave that to God. For it is written,

"I will take vengeance;  
I will repay those who deserve it,"  
Says the Lord.

Instead, do what the Scriptures say:

"If your enemies are hungry, feed them.  
If they are thirsty, give them something to drink,  
And they will be ashamed of what they have done to you."

Don't let evil get the best of you, but conquer evil by doing good.

These verses summarize the core of Christian living. If we love someone the way Christ loves us, we will be willing to forgive. If we have experienced God's grace, we will want to pass it on to others.

And remember, grace is *undeserved* favor. By giving an enemy a drink, we're not excusing his misdeeds. We're recognizing him, forgiving him, and loving him in spite of his sins—just as Christ did for us.

In this day of constant lawsuits and incessant demands for legal rights, Paul's command sounds almost impossible. When someone hurts you deeply, instead of giving him what he deserves, Paul says to befriend him.

Why does Paul tell us to forgive our enemies?

- (1) Forgiveness may break a cycle of retaliation and lead to mutual reconciliation.
- (2) It may make the enemy feel ashamed and change his or her ways.
- (3) By contrast, repaying evil for evil hurts you just as much as it hurts your enemy.

Even if your enemy never repents, forgiving him or her will free you of a heavy load of bitterness.

Forgiveness involves both attitudes and actions. If you find it difficult to *feel* forgiving toward someone who has hurt you, try responding with kind actions. If appropriate, tell this person that you would like to heal your relationship.

Lend a helping hand. Send him or her a gift. Smile at him or her. Many times you will discover that right actions lead to right feelings.

What does it mean to "heap burning coals" on someone's head? This may refer to an Egyptian tradition of carrying a pan of burning charcoal on one's head as a public act of repentance. By referring to this proverb, Paul was saying that we should treat our enemies with kindness so that they will become ashamed and turn from their sins.

The best way to get rid of enemies is to turn them into friends.

## **The peacemakers are called the sons of God.**

### **Matthew 5:9**

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Each beatitude tells how to be *blessed*. "Blessed" means more than happiness. It implies the fortunate or enviable state of those who are in God's kingdom.

The Beatitudes don't promise laughter, pleasure, or earthly prosperity. To Jesus, "blessed" means the experience of hope and joy, independent of outward circumstances. To find hope and joy, the deepest form of happiness, follow Jesus no matter what the cost.

## **Forgive those who sin against you.**

### **Luke 17:3**

"Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.

Jesus may have been directing this warning at the religious leaders who taught their converts their own hypocritical ways (see Matthew 23:15). They were perpetuating an evil system. A person who teaches others has a solemn responsibility (James 3:1). Like physicians, a teacher should keep this ancient oath in mind: "First, do no harm."

To rebuke does not mean to point out every sin we see; it means to bring sin to a person's attention with the purpose of restoring him or her to God and to fellow humans. When you feel you must rebuke another Christian for a sin, check your attitudes before you speak. Do you love the person?

Are you willing to forgive? Unless rebuke is tied to forgiveness, it will not help the sinning person.

**Look out for the interest of others also.**

### **Philippians 2:4**

Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Philippi was a cosmopolitan city. The composition of the church reflected great diversity, with people from a variety of backgrounds and walks of life.

Acts 16 gives us some indication of the diverse makeup of this church. The church included Lydia, a Jewish convert from Asia and a wealthy businesswoman (Acts 16:14); the slave girl (Acts 16:16-17), probably a native Greek; and the jailer serving this colony of the empire, probably a Roman (Acts 16:25-36).

With so many different backgrounds among the members, unity must have been difficult to maintain. Although there is no evidence of division in the church, its unity had to be safeguarded (Phil. 3:2; Phil. 4:2).

Paul encourages us to guard against any selfishness, prejudice, or jealousy that might lead to dissension. Showing genuine interest in others is a positive step forward in maintaining unity among believers.

**Those who please God will be at peace with the enemy.**

### **Proverbs 16:7**

When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.

## Chapter 3

### **Forgive those who have a complaint against you.**

#### **Colossians 3:13**

Bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

The key to forgiving others is remembering how much God has forgiven you. Is it difficult for you to forgive someone who has wronged you a little when God has forgiven you so much? Realizing God's infinite love and forgiveness can help you love and forgive others.

### **Bear no grudges.**

#### **Leviticus 19:18**

'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.

God instructed the Hebrews to provide for those in need. He required that the people leave the edges of their fields unharvested, providing food for travelers and the poor. It is easy to ignore the poor or forget about those who have less than we do. But God desires generosity. In what ways can you leave the "edges of your field" for those in need?

"Do not. . ." Some people think the Bible is nothing but a book of don'ts. But Jesus neatly summarized all these rules when he said to love God with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself. He called these the greatest commandments (or rules) of all (Matthew 22:34-40).

By carrying out Jesus' simple commands, we find ourselves following all of God's other laws as well.

People often find it easy to dismiss the opinions of the elderly and avoid taking time to visit with them. But the fact that God commanded the Israelites to honor the elderly shows how seriously we should take the responsibility of respecting those older than we. Their wisdom gained from experience can save us from many pitfalls.

**Allow no root of bitterness to spring up.**

**Hebrews 12:15**

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it may be defiled;

Like a small root that grows into a great tree, bitterness springs up in our hearts and overshadows even our deepest Christian relationships.

A “bitter root” comes when we allow disappointment to grow into resentment, or when we nurse grudges over past hurts. Bitterness brings with it jealousy, dissension, and immorality.

When the Holy Spirit fills us, however, he can heal the hurt that causes bitterness.

**Love others as Christ has loved us.**

**John 13:34**

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

To love others was not a new commandment (see Leviticus 19:18), but to love others as much as Christ loved others was revolutionary. Now we are to love others based on Jesus' sacrificial love for us. Such love will not only bring unbelievers to Christ; it will also keep believers strong and united in a world hostile to God. Jesus was a living example of God's love, as we are to be living examples of Jesus' love.

Jesus says that our Christlike love will show we are his disciples. Do people see petty bickering, jealousy, and division in your church? Or do they know you are Jesus' followers by your love for one another?

Love is more than simply warm feelings; it is an attitude that reveals itself in action. How can we love others as Jesus loves us? By helping when it's not convenient, by giving when it hurts, by devoting energy to others' welfare rather than our own, by absorbing hurts from others without complaining or fighting back.

This kind of loving is hard to do. That is why people notice when you do it and know you are empowered by a supernatural source. The Bible has another beautiful description of love in 1 Cor. 13.

**To ask Jesus to come into your heart please pray this Prayer:**

Dear Lord Jesus, I believe you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I ask you to forgive me of my sins and coming into my heart. I accept you as savior and will follow you as Lord. Amen.

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