



LOVE PEOPLE PEACEMAKER

SPIRITUAL OUTCOME DEFINED

Proactively seeks reconciliation and offers forgiveness and grace to those who have caused offense or harm.

SPIRITUAL OUTCOME DESCRIBED

Conflict is inevitable in every relationship. The question is not *whether* conflict will happen, but when it does happen, how will it be handled, and will it be handled well? The world is filled with examples of poorly managed conflict. Friendships are needlessly lost over miscommunication. Families are torn apart by stubborn refusal to give ground. Churches are split and rendered ineffective because a few people get overly determined.

Conflict is dangerous and can be highly destructive, but it doesn't have to be. Conflict, when handled well, can be productive and highly effective at bringing about a greater unity and understanding among those involved.

Marriages thrive when they have passed through the tunnel of conflict and come out the other side. The bonds of friendship are strengthened when people go toe-to-toe and gain greater understanding of one another. Churches, too, are strengthened when people discuss their differences or wounds in an effort to root out the cancer of bitterness and unforgiveness.

It's for these reasons that Scripture says a great deal about conflict management, forgiveness, and accountability. *"Blessed are the peacemakers,"* Jesus said, *"for they will be called children of God"* (Matthew 5:9). Since Scripture contains many teachings on conflict, it must mean we need it. Healthy conflict is something that should make followers of Jesus stand out in the world since it is something all of humanity struggles with. Reconciliation with Christ makes reconciliation with others possible and is a beautiful way in which the gospel is displayed in the world. What enables this reconciliation is a deepening understanding of the forgiveness one has received. As it says in Colossians, "Bear with one another and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (3:13).

Pursuing healthy conflict takes a great deal of energy, fortitude, and above all, humility. This leads many to turn to the easy escape routes of gossip, isolationism, and bitterness. But, these escape routes are lethal. Left unchecked, these methods of escape will leave us with colored lenses through which we see everything — especially the people around us — far differently than we would if they were removed. This is why we are warned in Ephesians to, "get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you" (4:31-32).

Scripture's teaching on engaging in healthy conflict is clear and compelling. Familiarity with these teachings is essential in order that we might pursue conflict well.

"If you have 120 volts of electricity coming into your house but you have broken wiring, you may turn on the switch, but nothing works... Why? Because you have broken wiring. The power is ready to do its work... but where there is broken wiring, there is no power. Unity is necessary among the children of God if we are going to know the flow of power... to see God do His wonders."
- A. W. Tozer

EVIDENCE OF THIS SPIRITUAL OUTCOME IN A PERSON'S LIFE

- Knows and abides by the basic teachings of Scripture on conflict management in Matthew 18.
- Does not have any unresolved conflict with another person, even if the resolution is only one-sided.
- Regularly apologizes and asks forgiveness when in the wrong.
- Wisely and humbly approaches those who have offended them without having first spread the offense through gossip.

GUIDANCE

Read each passage multiple times. Then write your observations about the passage and any thoughts you have from the discernment question. What do you notice in the passage, and what does this reveal about your life?

PROVERBS 16:28

Observations:

Discernment Question: Thoughtfully and prayerfully consider your own words and actions. In the past, how have you created conflict? In the present, how are your words and actions creating conflict?

PROVERBS 20:19

Observations:

Discernment Question: Are you trustworthy? Are you a good friend? Why or why not? Do you speak despairingly about others when they're not present — even in humor — or are you careful with your words?

PROVERBS 26:20

Observations:

Discernment Question: Thoughtfully consider a conflict you have had with others. How did your words and actions increase the conflict? How did your words and actions bring about healthy resolution?

PROVERBS 27:5

Observations:

Discernment Question: How welcoming are you to correction? How effective are you at bringing correction to others in a way they will receive it?

PROVERBS 28:23

Observations:

Discernment Question: Do you speak thoughtful encouragement to others, or do you flatter them with dishonest encouragement?

MATTHEW 5:21-26

Observations:

Discernment Question: How intentional are you about reaching out to those who are angry with you? Do you make the effort, or do you wait for them to make the effort?

MATTHEW 18:15-20

Observations:

Discernment Question: How effectively do you live out Jesus' teaching in this passage? When someone offends you, do you go to that person or do you go to others? When conflict continues to go unresolved, do you thoughtfully bring in others who can help, or do you give up and move on?

MATTHEW 18:21-35

Observations:

Discernment Question: If God forgave you to the extent you have forgiven others, would you be forgiven of your sins?

ROMANS 12:17-21

Observations:

Discernment Question: Do you take revenge, even in little ways, on those who offend you?

NEXT STEPS

What are practical next steps you will do based on what you have discovered in this survey of Scripture about pursuing healthy conflict? Include insights offered from others in your Life Group that could be applied in your own life, as well.

MEMORIZE SCRIPTURE

Romans 12:18, NIV

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Ephesians 4:2-3, NIV

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.



LOVE PEOPLE PEACEMAKER

MAN'S BEST FRIEND

Scripture's exhortation to love would be much easier if it read...

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."
This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your DOG as
yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments
(not quite Matthew 22:37-40).*

Yes, we love people — at least we want to. But people are much more complicated than the always-welcoming, always-forgiving, always-grateful dog.

Relationships are...

The best of life.

The greatest pleasure.

Relationships are...

The worst of life.

The greatest pain.

We seek people for pleasure. We avoid people from pain.

After God said of Adam, *"It is not good for the man to be alone"* (Genesis 2:18), He then had all the animals pass by Adam to name them. It was after viewing and naming the animals that Scripture observes: *"But for Adam no suitable helper was found."*

We smile at the thought of the welcomed companionship of a much-loved pet. We instinctively know, however, that, they are no full substitute for our need of other people. We were not designed to live in isolation. We were designed for relationship.

CONFLICT

Conflict is inevitable.

Even the best of friendships experience conflict.

How do we stay relationally engaged when we know, with relative certainty, we will get hurt?

FORGIVENESS

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21).

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22).

To follow Christ is to be a person of forgiveness. We do not hold things against people. We are a people of grace and mercy because we follow a God of grace and mercy.

Teachings on forgiveness sound great in theory, but when in the midst of complicated and conflicted situations, we wonder if they are naive. What about deep wounds? What about broken marriages? What about deceptive and domineering "friends"? What about the verbally abusive stepmother or the sexually abusive uncle? The old adage "forgive and forget" seems a bit trite in situations like these. Is this truly what Jesus had in mind?

Let's be daring. Let's not roll out a bunch of passages on grace and forgiveness. Let's do just the opposite.

Let's roll out a bunch of passages describing God's anger.

ANGER

About the God of grace and mercy, it also is said, "*God was very angry*" (Numbers 22:22).

And concerning the rebelling of Israel, we read, "*... He was angry and solemnly swore: 'No one from this evil generation shall see the good land I swore to give your ancestors...'*" (Deuteronomy 1:34-35).

Later we read of God's anger influencing His actions ...

Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel and said, "Because this nation has violated the covenant I ordained for their ancestors and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died" (Judges 2:20-21).

We turn to the New Testament, and it continues.

About Jesus, we read, "*He made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables*" (John 2:15).

And from Jesus, we hear, "*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!*" (Matthew 23:13a).

And at the end of the age, regarding the rebellious, we read that "*... they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur ...*" (Revelation 21:8).

Such passages may seem out of place when discussing grace and forgiveness. But what if they're not? What if they serve as a foundation for good, authentic, and lasting grace and forgiveness? If we talk about grace and forgiveness in absence of going toe-to-toe with the realities of justified anger, our grace and forgiveness will be, at best, shallow and forced.

GOD'S GRACE

It's critical to note God's process of moving from anger to grace. What did God do to establish peace with His people? How did He move from a place of justified anger to a place of authentic forgiveness?

Let's talk about what He *didn't* do.

God has never winked at an offense. He has never looked at humanity's rebellion and in any way communicated that it's minimal, a shoulder shrug, or something to be downplayed. To the contrary, reconciling humanity's offense is the centerpiece of God's story.

There's a critical message in this.

Teachings on forgiveness and grace often send a misinformed message that the follower of Christ must minimize an offense. He or she must be the kind of person who never gets angry, never gets offended — and when hurt, pretends to always be OK.

Such thinking is not only misinformed, but dangerous and ironic. Dangerous because it causes great harm. Ironic because it leads away from the very forgiveness it professes to embrace.

Real forgiveness starts with reality. It stares the offense in the face. It acknowledges depth of hurt. It states legitimate and justified anger. If we pretend the offense is nothing, then forgiveness is nothing more than the painter whitewashing a rotten board. Nothing has really changed; it just looks better on the outside.

When humanity rebelled against God and has continued to rebel, God has let us know. He has made it clear that our offense is offensive. So, how is God able to be both just in His anger and gracious at the same time? He accomplished this through the sacrifice of His own son.

At the moment of separation, when Christ screams out to the heavens from the cross, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). God enacted His righteous judgment and wrath on our sin through the perfect, obedient death of Christ, while simultaneously exhibiting grace by allowing that sacrifice to cover the multitude of sins that should have resulted in our death instead of His! The message from the cross speaks volumes to many aspects of life, not the least of which is the bold statement it makes about the weight of our offense and the counterweight of God's grace. God has not carelessly handed out forgiveness.

This leads to an obvious, but all-too-neglected starting point for dealing with conflict.

DEAL WITH IT

When dealing with conflict, we must be forthright.

If someone sins against you, "*...go and point out their fault, just between the two of you*" (Matthew 18:15a).

The teaching is not...

...stuff your anger and say nothing about his fault.

Or

...go and tell other people about his fault.

Or

...meditate on his offense and make it worse than it actually is.

We deal with offense. We engage. God has not hidden His anger. He has made His anger known and worked hard to bring about reconciliation. Likewise, we are a people of reconciliation, but not by glossing over offenses. We open the issue between offending parties. When the offender is unyielding, we do not then cower. Rather-

If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector (Matthew 18:15-17).

Put another way, when someone offends you, don't let it fester and grow. Don't spread the offense to others unless their help is needed in the second or third conversation to bring about reconciliation. Unchecked anger is cancerous. We know well the experience of playing and replaying an offense in our minds. Rather than subside quietly, offenses grow in our thoughts, sometimes appearing larger than they actually are.

Hear carefully these words to the people of Ephesus, *"In your anger do not sin;" Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold (Ephesians 4:26-27).*

Notice this scripture doesn't say that we should never get angry, but it assumes that we will. Anger is natural. God Himself gets angry. and for good reasons. What we do with that anger is what's important, for if we let it grow instead of addressing it head-on, it can lead to a host of problems. When we don't deal with it, we give the enemy a "foothold" in our lives, leaving us vulnerable to manipulation. The enemy leverages that unaddressed anger to wreck the marriage, wreck the job, wreck the church, or wreck the friendship. Letting the setting sun be the standard of timely reconciliation is a standard that protects from a many other problems.

TENSION

Be upfront with your anger. Don't let it have the final voice. Deal with it immediately. Let the offense be known to the appropriate parties involved, move toward forgiveness, and then move on.

It would be nice if life were that cut and dry, but it's not. Maybe it works if we're talking day-to-day offenses, but what about deep wounds? What about complicated and ongoing relationships? What about past trauma or present abuses? Do we just voice our anger, forgive, and move on?

A critical distinction must be made.

Consider this statement: *Forgiveness is a gift; trust is earned.*

Forgiveness is given to those who do not deserve it. If we have a situation where our instinctive response is, *"That person does not deserve forgiveness,"* we are correct. Grace is never deserved. If we are waiting for a person to display worthiness of grace, then we have confused forgiveness and grace for something they are not. We have mistaken it for trust.

Trust is given to those who have shown themselves to be trustworthy. The exhortations of Scripture to forgive those who have offended us — even deeply — is most emphatically *not* an exhortation to pretend nothing has happened. The old adage "forgive and forget" is not the true counsel of Scripture.

We forgive and do not let anger fester toward others; but this does not mean we must forget what happened. We are not required to fully entrust ourselves to those who are not trustworthy. Life is full of complicated situations where this would be naive at best and dangerous at worst. Scripture does not teach us to make ourselves needlessly vulnerable.

This leads to a second tension in this experience: How to bestow forgiveness and grace in generous proportions while not naively entrusting ourselves to others.

Consider the following...

If we forgive without protecting, we become vulnerable.

If we protect without forgiving, we become bitter.

Recognizing this distinction is a powerful tool.

Letting ourselves say, "I cannot trust that person and need to protect myself" may be exactly what we need to say in order to isolate forgiveness and grace from trust, so grace becomes accessible. When the two are jumbled together, it's difficult to do either.

Let's look at Scripture to see what how it addresses both sides of this tension.

FORGIVENESS

The man was deep in debt. He owed a great deal of money to his boss, and his boss called in his loans. The man could not pay the debt, so *"the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt"* (Matthew 18:25).

This, of course brought the man to his knees: *"Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything'"* (Matthew 18:26).

How will his boss respond? This was big money. Surely no one would expect forgiveness in a situation like this. Will he consider this servant's suggestion of a payment plan?

"The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go" (Matthew 18:27).

This was unexpected. A serious and significant debt was forgiven. Others would be happy for this man. They'd feel his relief. They'd tell and retell this story of grace.

They'd also expect the forgiven man to become a man of grace himself. But such was not the case.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded" (Matthew 18:28).

He experienced grace but demanded justice. He demanded that others give him what he himself was not able to give. His debtor pleaded for mercy just as he had: *"Be patient with me, and I will pay it back"* (Matthew 18:29).

This would be the moment of truth. Would he extend to others the grace he had just received?

"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt" (Matthew 18:30).

Word traveled fast. *"When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened"* (Matthew 18:31).

The boss was displeased. He took bold and decisive action.

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed" (Matthew 18:32-34).

Jesus drew a parallel: *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart"* (Matthew 18:35).

In other words, judgmental actions toward others are incompatible with a person who has experienced the grace of God. Our offense before God is great, as is evidenced by the severity of Christ's cross. When we truly get this, we are far more prepared to extend a similar grace to the deep and complicated offenses that have come our way. This does not minimize the offense any more than God minimizes our offenses toward Him. We extend an undeserved grace just as an undeserved grace was extended to us.

So, yes. Scripture's teaching on forgiveness is both broad and deep.

But what about entrusting ourselves to others? What does Scripture say about protecting ourselves?

SELF-PROTECTION

It's true. Scripture teaches we are not our own protector. God is our protector. There are many passages on the topic.

"He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us." (2 Corinthians 1:10)

And...

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." (Psalm 23:4).

And...

"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.' Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence." (Psalm 91:1-3).

Verse after verse, passage after passage, we are encouraged and comforted by Scripture's abundant teaching on God's protection. Yes, we could attempt to protect ourselves, but these attempts are foolish. Why protect ourselves by our own limited strength when God is infinitely more capable of looking out for us?

Scripture doesn't teach us to *not* protect ourselves; scripture's guides us toward the best protection. The teaching is not, *"Remove all protection from your life."* The teaching is, *"Seek protection from the greatest strength available."* God has both infinite strength and infinite wisdom. We will find no better source of ultimate protection.

With that in mind, to experience God's protection, we listen to His guidance. What would He have us do? What steps would He have us take? How does He counsel our relational world — specifically in the area of dealing with difficult people?

Consider the following proverb: *"Like a broken tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in a time of trouble"* (Proverbs 25:19).

It's a simple statement, but it's profound. It is counsel against relying upon an "unfaithful" person. Wisdom is discerning. We're not counseled to naively trust any and all people. This is counsel from our Protector. It's a situation He's telling us to avoid.

Consider another: *"Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm"* (Proverbs 13:20).

Or more boldly: *"Stay away from a fool, for you will not find knowledge on their lips"* (Proverbs 14:7).

And one more: *"Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs than a fool bent on folly"* (Proverbs 17:12).

Again and again, Scripture counsels cautiousness toward those whose association will do us harm. This does not mean we do not love these people, challenge these people, and yes, forgive these people. But it does mean wisdom acknowledges the need for careful boundaries.

This wisdom is given from our Protector. It would be foolish to ask for His protection and then ignore His wise counsel. If we truly trust Him and look to Him for protection, we will carefully consider and apply the guidance He gives. When we love God, we listen to God. God gives depth of insight and wisdom. Those who love Him will take advantage of this counsel.

The wise counsel from our Protector is not to isolate ourselves from all people to protect us from all harm. There will be complicated situations — such as marriages — where determining the best path forward will take careful consideration, counsel of others, and thoughtful attention to Scripture’s teachings. But the principle is clear: Just because Scripture boldly teaches grace, this does not mean we toss wisdom aside and fail to adjust degrees of trust.

AS FAR AS...

Paul’s charge to the church in Rome pulls much of this together: *“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone”* (Romans 12:18).

And it’s no coincidence that that statement closely follows this one: *“Love must be sincere...”* (Romans 12:9).

If our love is sincere, it will consistently offer grace toward those who offend.

And if our love is sincere, we will know the difference between extending grace and extending trust.

If peace is not present in our relationships, let it not be because of our inaction or unwillingness. There will be times when others refuse to engage in reconciliation, but may that refusal not come from us.

Relational situations are often complicated due to neglecting the straightforward teachings of Scripture. When anger is not dealt with and offenses pile up, situations become far more complicated than if they had been dealt with initially. With God as our God, we need not cower from the awkward and challenging conversations associated with reconciliation. We can engage courageously. We are a free people and shouldn’t be controlled by anger, fear, or foolishness.



LOVE PEOPLE PEACEMAKER

APPLY

Who is it?

As you read through the peacemaker reading, somebody keeps coming to mind, or maybe several somebodies.

It's the co-worker, the friend, the spouse, or the roommate.

Or it's the ex-co-worker, the ex-friend, the ex-spouse, or the ex-roommate.

Maybe the offense is recent or maybe it's long past. But regardless, the thought of addressing that conflict, or even thinking about it, is daunting. Human instinct is to push these thoughts down, to suppress them, and to get on with our lives. But to do so is dangerous; to ignore anger or wounds is about as wise as ignoring cancer. These things make themselves known whether we like it or not. It's far better to address them directly in hopes of true healing. The efforts may or may not heal the relationship; but at a minimum, we ourselves want and need both healing and wholeness.

The exercise that follows brings theory into practice.

With whom are we in conflict, how can we heal, and what must we do?

FIRST STAGE: IDENTIFY PEOPLE

People in your present

- Whom are you currently avoiding?

- With whom are you uncomfortable, vulnerable, or anxious being around?

- With whom are you avoiding a conversation that you know you really need to have?

- Who is angry or frustrated with you, even if you're not angry or frustrated with him or her?

- Toward whom do you maintain anger or unforgiveness toward (a lot or a little)?

Possible Conflicted Relationships

Past

Present

SECOND STAGE: CLARIFY THE ISSUE AND DEVELOP NEXT STEPS

Step 1: Thoughtfully and prayerfully sort the names above into one of the these three columns.

**I have forgiven
them and they have forgiven
me.**

**I have not forgiven them or
they have not forgiven me.**

**I'm not sure if I have forgiven
them or if they have forgiven
me.**

Step 2: Forgiveness and Trust Guide

The page that follows is a guide. Use it to prayerfully discern the true issues and identify your next step for each of the people listed in the columns above. Multiple copies of the guide are provided (a page is used for each person). If you need more, simply print extra copies or write your responses on another sheet of paper.

FORGIVENESS AND TRUST GUIDE

Name of person:

What happened? How has this person offended you or you offended him or her? Be as succinct and clear as possible.

What steps have you taken to forgive this person or to seek forgiveness?

Which of the following statements best describes the current reality?

_____ I need to address their offense.

If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you... (Matthew 18:15).

_____ I need to address my offense.

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

_____ I have done all I can do.

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (Romans 12:18).

Do you trust them? Do they trust you? If no, where appropriate, what could be said or done for trust to be built? And what must be done for healthy protection?

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THIRD STAGE: SEEK GOD'S STRENGTH AND WISDOM

Use this page to write a prayer to God. Ask for His power to authentically forgive. Ask for His wisdom to know what to do. Ask for His courage to do it. Be open and honest with reservations and resistance.

Notes: