

Handling Sensitive Conversations

Most of the problems in local church life are not theological as much as they are relational. Usually they entail some form of failure in handling relational interactions. God's people need to have His presence and wisdom in handling sensitive interactions.

Two extreme errors of handling problem areas or conflicts – Sensitive Conversations

1. Never address question or touchy areas to avoid conflict
2. You address or have addressed questions or touchy areas in an inappropriate way

Book “Outliners” *Korean airliners were once crashing at a disturbing rate. Otherwise talented pilots were making mistakes and the mistakes were leading to catastrophe. Examining Korean Air Flight 801 on August 5, 1997, in detail revealed that there was no single disastrous mistake during that flight. Instead, a series of smaller mistakes snowballed until the plane ended up running head first into the side of a mountain. Subsequent analysis made it clear that the mistakes of the pilot and crew were largely communication errors. Further, there was a distinct cultural component to these errors. It turns out that Korean cultural traditions of respect and politeness prevented the pilots and the crew from communicating effectively and making crucial decisions that could have prevented the crash. The commander/pilot was looking at the red light and kept circling, but the co pilots knew they were running out of fuel and they didn't speak up and the planes crashed. It happened several times. A new set of procedures was put in place and, today, Korean Airlines has an exemplary record in terms of air safety.*

Sensitive Conversation

Conversations in which opinions vary, emotions, and stakes are high – 70% of the time people will walk away and not address the real issues.

First, opinions vary. For example, A husband and wife address a critical issue in their marriage that they both disagree on. You're talking with your boss about a possible promotion. She thinks you're not ready; you think you are.

Second, stakes are high. If you don't work through this issue and continue the same direction the marriage will break down, the home group will continue to wane in vitality, your company or shift will continue to falter.

Third, emotions run strong. You're in the middle of a casual discussion with your spouse and he or she brings up an "ugly incident" that took place at yesterday's interaction with neighbors or fellow church member. You are having conversation with someone and they bring up a touchy subject that is completely off the subject you had been talking about. You quickly move into a heated debate.

What makes these types of conversations so crucial and challenging is that their results will greatly affect your life for better or worse.

Another important issue with them is that they often come up in an unplanned time or inopportune time (in the heat of stirred up emotions).

Human nature would want to back away from discussions we fear will hurt us or make things worse. We dodge touchy issues and in doing so we often sin by relieving the pressure through gossip, murmuring (quiet complaining), or slander.

We typically handle these conversations in one of three ways

We can avoid them.

We can face them and handle them poorly leading to destructive consequences.

We can face them and handle them well.

Some Common Sensitive Conversations

Talking to a friend, church member, or co-worker about an offensive behavior or giving them feedback about their behavior

Approaching a brother or sister about attitudes or behavior that go against God's will

Asking someone to repay a loan or discussing their financial discrepancies in what they say they don't have and what they spend on non essential things

Approaching a boss or someone who is living in a way that goes against what they said they believed and valued

Talking to a coworker or fellow church member about a personal problem

Critiquing a colleague's work

Asking a roommate to change or move out

Resolving custody or visitation issues with an ex-spouse

Speaking or dealing with a rebellious teen.

Talking to a co-worker or brother or sister about not keeping commitments

Discussing with your spouse problems with sexual intimacy

Talking to a colleague or fellow church member about not being a team player or having a "my ministry" attitude.

Giving an unfavorable performance review

Asking in-laws to quit interfering in your lives

One of our biggest challenges in these types of conversations is that we can't control our emotional reactions. We are quickly under emotional pressure. Fight or flight instincts take over. This is why we often say and do things that make sense in the moment, but later seem very inappropriate (what was I thinking). It seems that when it matters the most these things cause us to be on our worst behavior.

If we avoid them we often take the sinful route of dropping hints, nagging, making sarcastic remarks, gossiping or complaining to others. This is self defeating because you put off signals that push people away and open yourselves up to demonic influence

Successful, God glorifying relationships require our ability to talk openly and successfully through these types of conversations.

We must learn how to stay in the dialogue

We want the free flow of meaning between two or more people, not debating or argument, or trying to "win." This hints of the wrong approach to staying in dialogue. As we approach them we must start with our heart. We must begin with the right motives, both us and them pleasing Jesus.

Biggest problem in sensitive conversations - the story we listen to or tell ourselves in the midst of them.

In between what they say and how we react we tell ourselves a story (that is usually wrong and based on a bunch of other things, from our past experiences, our frustrations from life etc.). Our stories are our interpretation of the facts and really are an attempt to answer why, how, or what is happening.

Stories

Are interpretations of facts

Explain what we see and hear and are our evaluation of the situation

Tell us what we should do about the situation

Once told they take on a life of their own

Stories often become strongholds (wrong patterns of thinking that destroy relationships)

2Co 10:3-5 NASB For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, (4) for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. (5) We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ)

Retrace our paths that lead to the problems in the midst of sensitive conversations. In doing so we arrest the story

Notice your behavior and attitudes – ask:

Am I projecting hatred, bitterness etc.?

Get in touch with your feelings – ask:

What emotions are encouraging me to act and feel this way?

What story is creating these emotions?

Get back to the facts – ask:

What evidence do I have to support this story?

Watch for 3 deceptive stories

“it’s not my fault”

“it’s all their fault”

“there’s nothing else I can do”

Master your stories in the light of God’s presence

Separate fact from story and regain emotional control – ask:

Is this the only right emotional response to the situation?

Questioning our feelings leads to questioning our stories

Separate subjective conclusions from objective facts by asking:

Was it their actual behavior or my interpretation of their behavior?

Conclusions explain what you think not what actually happened.

Watch for emotionally laden words that you contributed to the problem by asking:

What words carry an undertone of judgment?

Less volatile descriptions allow for multiple interpretations.

Master your stories by telling the rest of the story

What I am pretending not to notice about my role in the problem?

Why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do what this person is doing?

What do I really want?

Am I being rational?

Am I being reasonable?

What would I do now if I really wanted to move forward?

Other important things in sensitive conversations:

We must try to make our dialogue safe

Establish and maintain mutual purpose and respect “do unto others”.

Do others believe you care about them and their goals?

Do they trust your motives?

Do others believe you respect them?

If you make a mistake in the dialogue

Apologize (when appropriate and sincere)

Contrast to fix misunderstandings with Don't/Do statements– I don't want you to think that I...but I really do want....

Don't/Do statements

Addresses others' concerns that you don't respect them or that you have a malicious purpose

Helps other to understand that you care about what's best for them not just yourself in the conversation.

Confirms your respect or clarifies your real purpose.

Provides context.

Contrasting Role Plays – If I was in your shoes and was thinking that...but that is not my purpose or desire here. Here is my real purpose.

Make conversations safe with mutual purpose in God

Do others believe I care about what's best for them in the conversation?

Do they trust my motives?

If the goal is to get our way or manipulate others we lose a safe environment.

What do I want for me?

What do I want for others?

What do I want for the relationship?

Try to see the other person's point of view, you can often find a way to draw the other person willingly into even very sensitive conversations.”

(Important) The instant people perceive disrespect in a conversation, the interaction is no longer about the original purpose– it is now about defending dignity.

No Rolling eyes, Sarcasm, Emotions that turn from fear to anger, Pouting, Name-calling, Yelling, or Threats.

Remember that honor and respect is an absolute in God. At the least we honor and respect the image of God that everyone bears. This doesn't mean we agree with them, just honor and respect them.

If you have disrespected or others feel you have

Apologize - When you have made a mistake that has negatively affected others

Don't/do I don't want to suggest that this...but I do want...

Go through role playing that brought you to the tension in a safe environment

Share your facts

Tell your story“- Based on the facts, I am beginning to conclude...”

Ask for other's paths without clamming up or blowing up. Ask and be interested in their thoughts and paths. Tell them not to worry about hurting your feelings. Restate their story to show that you have heard it and understand. Prime them if they are reluctant to share their story and path.

What are their facts?

What is their story?

Talk tentatively.

Encourage testing – don't push your story too hard.

Invite their opposing view.

Ask what you are missing here.

Sensitive conversations often go awry not because of the content of the conversation, but because others believe that pain they feel means that you have a malicious intent.

Reiterate that your goal is not to cause them harm, but that both of you find the way forward in God.

Biblical Resolution in God

The Biblical term "Reconciliation" means "the establishment of friendly relationships between parties who are at variance." This is what God did for us through Jesus and we are given the "ministry of reconciliation." 2 Cor 5:17-19

There are critical things that need to happen when people become separated from each other through sin and conflict.

To Reconcile we usually need three things to be worked into our life.

- 1. Asking for and giving forgiveness** - It usually takes two to fight and two to cause a conflict. Most of the time everyone does something they need to repent of.
- 2. Tearing down the lies that came into our minds when we were in conflict.** 2 Corin 10:4-5
- 3. Overcome the wrong by doing right and the evil by doing good.** Rom 12:21, Lk 6:27-31, 1 Pet 3:9

Biblical forgiveness works in three areas.

- 1. God forgiving us (1 John 1:9; Luke 7:47).**
- 2. Getting over our past failures (Phil.3:13-14).**
- 3. The forgiveness we give to others (Luke 17:3-4).**

"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" Colossians 3:13 (see also Ephesians 4:32).

These three areas of forgiveness are important in our lives. We must understand God's gift of forgiveness to us, through the shed blood of Jesus (Colossians 1:13-14; 1 Peter 1:2). But we must also learn to get over our past failures and the failures of others - which simply means receiving and agreeing with God's gift of forgiveness.. Now we are obliged to forgive others. If we refuse to forgive others, then unforgiveness will block the daily expression of God's forgiveness in our lives.

"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" Matthew 6:14-15 (read also 18:21-35).

Stages of Unforgiveness if not dealt with in God's design

- * **Initial hurt** - someone says or does something that wounds our hearts (Psalm 109:22).
- * **Resentment** - if we don't deal with it straight away, we begin to harbor resentment. Our hearts dwell on the hurt. We are filled with self-pity and a continuing anger against the person who hurt us (Colossians 3:8-10,12-14).
- * **Retaliation** - we get back at that person, usually either by not speaking to them, or by slandering them to others (Romans 12:17-20).
- * **Bitterness** - this is where we allow unforgiveness to defile our hearts (Hebrews 12:15; Ephesians 4:29-32).

If we do not overcome unforgiveness we will forever be a prisoner of the past and out the relationship with God He desires. If we hang onto it we live disobeying Jesus.

One simple principle in forgiveness is not to allow feelings of hurt and unforgiveness to enter a second day. *"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.*

Each evening we can get things right with God and with others. One other provision God has made is the communion table. Whenever we partake of the Lord's Supper together, we

are instructed to make sure we are not holding anything against a brother or sister (1 Corinthians 11:27-31).

Walking in the Continuing Debt of Love

"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another..."

Romans 13:8.

When Jesus died for you, he took the judgment you deserved. Because He so loved us, out of gratitude and obligation we owe a debt to love others the way He loved us. *1 John 4:11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* We now express our love to God by loving others. We cannot be close to God while harboring hatred and unforgiveness.

"If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen" 1 John 4:20.

When we forgive others, we acknowledge several things:

- * God's love for us (Matt.18:21-35; Luke 6:36; John 13:34-35; Psalm 103:7-14).
- * Our love for God (Luke 7:47; 1 John 4:20).
- * Our trust in God's justice (2 Thessalonians 1:3-7).
- * Our faith in God's plan for us (Romans 8:28).
- * Our readiness to suffer abuse (Matt.5:11-12).
- * Our enemy is not people (Ephesians 6:12).
- * Our secure position in Christ (Col.1:1-4).

If I forgive, will the hurt I feel go away? Probably not immediately. But forgiveness has nothing to do with feelings. *Forgiveness is a decision. Forgetting is a process.* Another way to say it is that if we remember we remember with forgiveness. If we decide not to forgive, the hurt is like an open, festering wound, which is very difficult to heal. When we make the decision to forgive, the hurt is cleaned up, and the healing process is then quick.

Healing the Heart

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" Psa.147:3.

God is able to heal every heart. In fact, this is part of the Gospel message (Isaiah 61:1). But more than that, God wants to use us to minister that healing to others. Only when we have experienced both the personal forgiveness of God and the grace to forgive others can we be used to minister healing to others.

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in