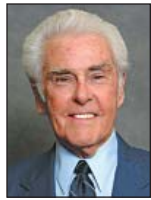


Distinct in my approach to conflict

Road rage. Workplace hostility. Conflict management. These are phrases that have entered our common language. While some people run from anger and conflict, others seem to embrace it. In our study today, we don't need to hide from conflict, but we can appropriately and carefully work toward reconciliation.



John Howell

Old Testament condemnation of murder (Exodus 20:13, Deuteronomy 5:17). In Jesus' quotation of what was said "to the men of old," he refers to the translation "you shall not kill" but other translations of Exodus declare "you shall not murder." This translation more appropriately assigns greater responsibility to an individual's intent to kill a person such that it becomes murder from our common English translation of the Hebrew word.

In the late Professor Roy Honeycutt's study of this command, he correctly points out that it was not the purpose of the Sixth Commandment "to exclude either capital punishment or war.... In its treatment of cases which involved human life, it is significant to note that the Old Testament distinguished clearly between homicide and murder (cf. Exodus 21:12f, Deuteronomy 19:4f, *These Ten Words*, pp. 73-74).

Jesus probed beneath the fact of murder to deal with emotional causes of murder (Matthew 5:21-24).

Anger as a motivating factor: "But I say to you that every man who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment." Certainly anger in the church has resulted in much disappointment and conflict among members. Dr. Daniel Bagby, pastor and pastoral therapist, did his doctoral research on anger. "I chose to devote attention primarily

to anger," he said, "because my experience with anger leads me to believe that it is the least understood of the strong emotions which affect Christians in the world" (*Understanding Anger in the Church*, pp. 18-19). Bagby maintains that anger is so quickly condemned that it cannot be dealt with appropriately.

If all anger is judged as evil, we must pay attention to God's anger (Exodus 22:24, Job 9:12, Psalm 2:4, for example); Jesus' anger (Mark 3:4-5); and Paul's advice, "Be angry but do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Ephesians 4:26).

The anger that Jesus condemns is the internalized resentment toward a brother that must be recognized and corrected before murderous behavior leads to the person being brought before the judges who can condemn him to judgment.

Insulting language as a motivating factor: "again anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin." Honeycutt points out that the higher righteousness taught by Jesus "demands that we maintain respect for human dignity." The term *raca* is considered to be an Aramaic word meaning something like "blockhead." The New Living Bible interprets the phrase, "If you say to a friend, 'You idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court.'" Honeycutt insists that "no man has a right to belittle the personality of another and treat him as being less than a person made in God's image" (pp. 75-76).

Calling a person "a fool!" is the most damaging motivational factor: "Whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire." No court will condemn a person to death because of a bad attitude. However, feelings of anger or contempt are potentially dangerous when these negative attitudes lead to destructive behavior. The word translated "fool" carries a meaning more serious than *raca* since it connotes a worthless person, a

Bible Studies for Life

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Scripture: Matthew 5:21-26

rebel against God or against parents.

Reconciliation is the desired Christian response to conflict (Matthew 5:23-26). Two illustrations are described. If while at worship, an individual remembers "that your brother has something against you," leave your gift at the altar and go immediately to seek reconciliation with your brother. When reconciliation occurs, then you are to return to the worship center and offer your gift to the Lord.

Such an action would take place when the worshipper was in the Temple at the altar, but would be difficult to do in our church worship. However, the need for taking action as soon as possible even today is mandated by this example of solving the conflict or disagreement as soon as possible. As one commentator put it, "reconciliation before sacrifice; morality before religion; first announcement of a great principle often repeated, systematically neglected by the religion of the time" (A. D. Brown, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, p. 107).

The second illustration involves a legal matter in which an individual is being taken to court to settle an account. He is encouraged to work out an agreement while on the way to the court so he will not be found guilty by the judge and placed in prison.

Even though the circumstances are not religious, the intent is reconciliation between conflicting persons. Because the situation is so different from the preceding one, some interpreters believe it is an interpolation into the text. However, it still focuses on resolution of differences between conflicting persons as an important principle.

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