

HOME SWEET

HOME

WEEK SIX

HOME SWEET HOME

A Seven-Day Devotional — Week 6

Conflict: Fighting the Problem, Not Each Other

Welcome to Week Six

This week, Home Sweet Home turns to conflict. It's not whether conflict happens, but how it's handled that matters. Every close relationship will face disagreement. The question that this week explores, through Ephesians 4:25–32, is whether that conflict tears a relationship down or, handled well, actually helps it grow.

Each day moves through a different piece of that process. Naming the unspoken expectations underneath most fights. Learning to speak honestly and listen well. Dealing with anger before it takes root. Recognizing destructive patterns before they calcify. Fighting the problem instead of each other. And finally, forgiving the way Christ forgave: completely and without keeping score.

Each day includes the full text of Scripture, an expanded teaching section drawn from the sermon, three reflection questions, one practical step, and a closing prayer. Move through a day at a time, and let God do His work.

DAY 1 How You Fight Matters

James 4:1–2

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.”

If you're breathing, and living anywhere near other sinners, you're going to have conflict. That's not pessimism. It's just the truth. The real question was never whether a marriage or a family will fight. It's how. Researcher John Gottman can watch a couple argue for five minutes and predict, with roughly ninety percent accuracy, whether the relationship will survive. But it's not based on whether they fight, but on the pattern of how they do it.

James, the kid brother of Jesus, asks the question directly: What causes quarrels and fights among you? His answer isn't about circumstances, but about desires that go unmet. Most of the time, a fight looks like it's about dishes, the thermostat, or a missed phone call. But most fights aren't really about what happened. They're about what someone expected to happen and didn't.

Every person walks into a relationship carrying a wheelbarrow full of expectations. Everything from how responsibilities in our homes get divided to how affection gets shown to who handles the money and how often you talk. Even how a holiday is supposed to feel is not exempt from our expectations. These expectations come from our families, past relationships, our culture and our own individual personality. Neither person's expectations are necessarily wrong. You are coming at life from two different angles.

The catch is that most of these expectations are never actually spoken out loud. Somewhere along the way, we assumed the other person should just know. Sometimes we think that our spouses or families can read our minds. That assumption is where a huge percentage of ordinary conflict starts. Long before the argument about the how to fold the laundry ever begins, there is usually something underneath it that is gnawing at people.

This week walks through Ephesians 4:25–32. In this passage, Paul doesn't tell us not to fight. He assumes that we will fight. After all, almost everywhere Paul went, a fight ensued over his faith. Paul tells us how to fight in a way that builds instead of destroys. Most marriages don't fall apart over irreconcilable differences. They fall apart because people never learned to resolve the smallest conflicts in healthy ways. As a result, small things quietly grow into big ones.

Before any specific tool or principle is presented, it's important to know: Conflict itself isn't the enemy. Unexamined expectations and unhealthy patterns are. Learning to fight well is one of the most practically loving things two people can do for each other.

Reflection

- Think back to your last real argument. Was it actually about the surface issue, or about an unmet expectation underneath it?
- What expectations are you carrying into your closest relationships that you've never actually spoken out loud?
- What was the dumbest fight you have ever been in? What was it over?

Take It Further

Think of your last few conflicts and write down, honestly, what expectation was underneath each one. Not the surface topic, but what you wanted that didn't happen.

Prayer

Father, thank you that conflict itself doesn't have to be the enemy. Help me see what's underneath my arguments, and teach me, this week, to fight in a way that honors you and the people I love. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 2 The Wheelbarrow of Expectations

1 Corinthians 13:4–5

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.”

Unspoken expectations follow a predictable pattern in a relationship. I expect something and you don't do it. As a result, I get hurt. Sometimes I decide you don't care and resentment builds. Eventually I start keeping score. I begin to think: I did this for you, but you didn't do that for me. We withhold love and blessing to each other. This is called the hurt cycle. It runs quietly in the background of countless relationships almost entirely undetected until it erupts.

It's easy to find a genuinely good spouse still convinced they're in a bad marriage, simply because they've trained their eyes to notice only what's missing. That's not usually a character flaw in either person. It's the hurt cycle doing exactly what it always does which is we magnify what someone didn't do (unmet expectations) and minimize what they did do that we often take for granted.

Of course, not all expectations are created equal. There are some things that should genuinely go without saying. In any family or relationship, honesty, faithfulness, respect, and handling responsibility are not negotiable. Those are essential for a healthy relationship. But if we're honest, most of our expectations aren't non-negotiable essentials like faithfulness. The expectations that fuel ordinary conflict are usually about personal preferences. The trouble starts when we quietly raise a personal preference (how to fold towels, how to clean a kitchen, how to...) to a must-have, non-negotiable, essential expectation.

This shows up in a variety of ways: Knowing what he/she wants for their birthday. How often you should text during the day. How early you should arrive somewhere. Some of the biggest fights in our homes happen when we turn 'this is how I like it' into 'this is how it ought to be. Once a preference gets treated like a moral failure when it's missed, conflict becomes almost guaranteed. It may never have been communicated in the first place.

This is where love, as described in 1 Corinthians 13, does something countercultural. Love doesn't insist on its own way. That doesn't mean preferences don't matter or shouldn't be voiced. They should be communicated. It means recognizing the difference between a genuine violation of what's essential and a simple mismatch of preferences.

Responding to every unmet preference like a betrayal will get us nowhere but miserable.

The work this week isn't to eliminate expectations. It's to get them out of the wheelbarrow and into the open. It's sorting them into what's essential and what's simply preferred long before they have the chance to quietly poison a relationship from the inside.

Reflection

- Which of your expectations have you been treating as non-negotiable?
- Where has the “hurt cycle” shown up in one of your close relationships?
- What's one expectation you've never actually spoken out loud that's been quietly shaping how you feel about someone?

Take It Further

Choose one unspoken expectation you've been carrying. Speak it out loud to the person this week.

Prayer

Lord, help me tell the difference between what's truly essential and what's simply my preference. Free me from the hurt cycle and give me the courage to speak my expectations instead of silently resenting what was never actually said. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 3 Say What Needs to Be Said

Ephesians 4:25

“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.”

Paul isn't just saying don't lie here. He's saying don't stay silent when something needs to be said. Silence can be its own kind of dishonesty, because it allows the other person to believe everything is fine when it isn't. Speaking the truth includes communicating

what you need and not making people guess at expectations they were never told. Unspoken expectations eventually curdle into unfair accusations. It's important to be honest about what you need from people. The reality is that we will all experience unmet expectations from time to time that haven't been communicated.

So what do you do when an unspoken expectation goes unmet? First, is this unmet expectation worth speaking about? Sometimes it isn't worth fighting about. As an example, is it really that important how clean he keeps his truck? After all, it's his truck. Marriage can make us more like Jesus than anything else in our lives, because there are some things that have to die in us (like an unnecessary expectation) so that the relationship can live. Second, if it's an expectation that is important to you, say it plainly: "I really wanted this to happen and here's why." And then ask, "What were your expectations?" For example, I was really hoping you would put the kids to bed because I had a really hard day. What did you hope would happen? Something to consider though: Was he/she even aware that you had a hard day? Was that expectation ever spoken?

But speaking clearly is only half of this verse's instruction. The other person needs to listen. James 1:19 says to be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to become angry. Most people run that completely backwards: quick to speak, quick to get defensive, slow to actually hear what's being said. One of the simplest, most effective tools for conflict is deceptively small. Before responding to a conflict, stop and repeat back what you just heard. "What I hear you saying is this? Is that right?" That single habit ends more arguments before they start than almost any other conflict technique available. They know you are trying to understand before trying to be understood.

Even with clear communication and careful listening, conflict will still happen. People are still people and even well-communicated expectations sometimes collide. But speaking honestly and listening well changes the starting point of every disagreement that follows from accusation toward actual understanding.

Reflection

- Where have you let silence stand in for honesty, assuming the other person should have just known?
- The next time you're in conflict, could you try repeating back what you heard before responding? What might that change?
- What's one thing you've been expecting from someone without ever actually saying it out loud?

Take It Further

In your next disagreement, pause before responding and say, “What I hear you saying is ... is that right?” before adding your own perspective.

Prayer

Father, give me the courage to speak the truth instead of hiding behind silence, and the humility to listen before I respond. Help me stop making people guess what I need. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 4 Deal With Anger Before It Deals With You

Ephesians 4:26–27

“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.”

In conflict, there are essentially three postures available. A peacebreaker says, I'm going to make you pay. A peacefaker says nothing's wrong, while quietly finding other ways to make the other person feel the anger anyway: the cold shoulder, the undone favor, the silent withholding. A peacemaker says something's wrong, but you matter more to me than winning this. That third posture is the only one Ephesians 4 is actually pointing toward.

In Ephesians 4, Paul isn't saying don't get angry. You're human, and some things are simply going to provoke real anger. Anger itself isn't sin. What you do with that anger is what turns it into sin. Lash out, and that's a problem. Hold onto it silently, letting it

calcify, and that's a problem too. The Bible says, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." That doesn't mean every single argument must be fully resolved before bedtime. It means don't let anger sit long enough in your heart to grow roots. Name it plainly, even just to yourself: I'm angry. That naming is often the first real step toward handling it well.

The next step after naming it is asking why. Why am I angry? Do I feel hurt, fear, disappointment, embarrassment, or an unmet expectation? The next question to ask yourself is: What was my own part in this? Did I overreact? Did I contribute to the problem myself? Then, the next step is to talk to the person. The Bible is very clear to talk to someone, not about them. Talking about them only stirs up more anger. Lastly, forgive them. Forgive them as God forgave you. Now, there are big slip-ups that require trust to be rebuilt, but that should never get in the way of our forgiveness. Forgiving isn't the same as reconciliation. It doesn't mean what they did was ok or minimize it in any way. It simply means I will not retaliate. I will not hold it against them. I am giving it to God who is the judge and He will take care of it. Forgiveness is cancelling someone's debt (sin against us) whether they apologize or make things right or not.

Why is forgiveness so essential in conflict? Verse 27 uses the Greek word *topos* for "opportunity." It's where we get our word topography. It literally means a room. Unresolved anger gives the devil a guest room inside your home. As anger becomes resentment, our bitterness grows and keeps finding fresh reasons to stay angry.

Resolving anger doesn't require having everything fully resolved by nightfall. It requires refusing to feed the anger further. Naming it, examining it honestly, and choosing not to let it settle into a guest room it was never invited to occupy.

Reflection

- Are you more often a peacebreaker, a peacefaker, or a peacemaker in conflict --- and with whom specifically?
- What's underneath your anger the next time it flares: hurt, fear, disappointment, or something else?

- Is there a “guest room” of unresolved anger currently occupied in one of your relationships?

Take It Further

The next time you feel anger rising, name it out loud: “I’m angry, and here’s why”, before deciding what to do with it.

Prayer

Lord, teach me to be angry without sinning, and not to let the sun go down on it. Close the door on any room I've given the enemy in my heart and make me a peacemaker instead of a peacebreaker or a peacefaker. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 5 The Four Horsemen

Proverbs 15:1

“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

How do you know if you've given the enemy a guest room? Gottman's research identifies four patterns so reliably destructive they're called the four horsemen of a struggling relationship. Recognizing them by name is often the first step toward disarming them.

The first is criticism. Criticism is worth different from a complaint. A complaint says: “You didn’t take the trash out.” Criticism says: “You didn’t take the trash out because you only think about yourself.” One attacks the problem; the other attacks the person’s character entirely.

The second is contempt. This is the eye roll, the mocking tone, or the sarcasm dripping with disdain. Contempt signals something deeper and more corrosive than frustration with someone. It signals you genuinely don’t like the person in front of you. Where contempt has taken hold, real outside help is usually needed, not just better communication technique.

The third is defensiveness. This is where nothing is ever one's own fault. Defensiveness blocks us owning our part of the conflict that could actually resolve it. It treats every conversation as a trial to be won rather than a problem to be solved together.

The fourth is stonewalling. This is shutting the other person out entirely, going silent, or just checking out. Now, sometimes a genuine break to calm down is healthy and necessary. But stonewalling is different. It's a wall meant to punish rather than to genuinely cool down before returning.

If you recognize yourself in one of these four, this isn't meant to produce shame. It's meant to produce an honest diagnosis. This is where we need to repent. Every one of these four horsemen can be repented of and replaced with something healthier.

Reflection

- Which of the four horsemen --- criticism, contempt, defensiveness, or stonewalling -- do you most often ride into conflict?
- Can you tell the difference between a genuine complaint and criticism aimed at character?
- Where do you need to repent in your relationship?

Take It Further

In your next disagreement, catch yourself before using any of the four horsemen, and replace it with a specific complaint, gentleness, ownership, or genuine engagement instead.

Prayer

Father, show me honestly which of these patterns I fall into, without letting me hide from it. Give me the humility to repent of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, or stonewalling, and replace it with something that builds instead of tears down. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 6 Fight the Problem, Not Each Other

Ephesians 4:28–29

“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

Paul's pattern throughout this whole section is consistent: Don't just put off the old behavior, put on a new one. Applied to conflict, the old behavior is fighting each other, each person trying to win. The new behavior is: Conflict was never actually you against me. It's us, together, against whatever is trying to divide us.

Picture the difference between a boxing ring, where two people are trying to knock each other out, and tag-team wrestling, where two people stand shoulder to shoulder against a common opponent. Conflict handled well looks like the second picture, not the first. We are partners in life, not adversaries.

Before any hard conversation, three questions are worth asking: Should I say it? Some things, however true, come from the flesh rather than the Spirit and simply shouldn't be said at all. Should I say it now? A real conversation might still need to happen, but not at 11:30 at night, not in front of the kids, not in the car. How should I say it? It's rarely only what gets said that determines the outcome. It's how its said.

A few concrete ground rules help keep conflict aimed at the problem instead of the person. Never call names. It's beneath the dignity of both people involved. Never raise your voice. Increased volume rarely improves an argument's outcome. Never get historical. Dragging up old grievances that have nothing to do with the current issue is never a good idea. Love keeps no record of wrongs. Never threaten divorce. That word, once introduced, invites fear rather than resolution. Never say “always” or “never.” Those absolutes are almost never true and practically guarantee an escalation as the other person searches for the one exception that disproves the claim.

When you can, it's good to set aside time to talk. Pick a calm, low-conflict night when the kids are in bed. Ask two questions: What are three ways I serve you well? and What

are three ways I could serve you better? The first trains your eyes to notice the good in the other person. The second opens the door to growth without the heat of an actual fight distorting the conversation.

Not every disagreement needs to be addressed. Some things are essential, some are important, and some are simply preferences that don't require a conversation. Proverbs 19:11 says good sense makes a person slow to anger, and it's to their glory to overlook an offense. Fighting the problem instead of each other sometimes means recognizing there's no real problem to fight about at all.

Reflection

- Do your conflicts tend to feel like a boxing match or like tag-team wrestling against a shared problem?
- Which of the “six nevers” do you most need to hear right now?
- What's one thing currently bothering you that might genuinely qualify as a preference worth overlooking rather than raising?

Take It Further

Pick a calm, low-conflict evening this week and ask someone close to you: What are three ways I serve you well, and three ways I could serve you better?

Prayer

Lord, help me fight the problem instead of the person I love. Give me discernment about what needs to be said, when, and how, and the good sense to overlook what doesn't need to be raised at all. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 7 Cancel the Debt

Ephesians 4:30–32

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God ... Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

Paul says to forgive as Christ forgave. How did Jesus forgive? Completely, at real cost. Bitterness and wrath are what happen when resentment is allowed to simply sit and ferment because unforgiveness hasn't been given. Forgiveness is the only thing strong enough to interrupt that process before it takes over. Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting what happened or minimizing the real hurt it caused. It doesn't mean trust is automatically restored. Trust, where it's been broken, has to be rebuilt slowly over time. Forgiveness is canceling a debt. I don't hold this against you anymore. Even without an apology. I won't dwell on it, mention it to others, or bring it up again as ammunition later.

But you don't have to feed the anger further. Forgiveness and resolution aren't on the same timeline. Verse 30 is easy to skip past but shouldn't be. The Holy Spirit lives inside every Christian and one of the ways he's grieved is by how believers treat each other. This mean conflict isn't only relational, it's spiritual. How you handle a disagreement with someone you love is also something between you and God.

This is where genuine repentance begins: I've been mean, short-tempered, ugly in how I've spoken and I receive God's grace anyway. That kind of honest confession, offered to God and often to the person involved, is what clears the anger, rather than just papering over it.

This whole week has traced one idea from different angles: Conflict isn't the enemy of a healthy relationship. Unexamined expectations, unspoken hurts, and unrepented patterns are. Handled with honesty, patience, and forgiveness, conflict can become one of the places where a relationship grows stronger.

Reflection

- Is there someone you're withholding forgiveness from because you've confused it with rebuilding trust?
- What would it look like to "cancel the debt" on something you've been quietly holding against someone?
- How does knowing that conflict affects your relationship with the Holy Spirit, not just with the other person, change how you want to handle your next disagreement?

Take It Further

Identify one debt you've been holding onto and take a concrete step toward canceling it this week in prayer first, and if appropriate, directly with the person involved.

Prayer

Father, thank you for forgiving me completely, at a cost I could never repay. Help me forgive the way you forgave: canceling debts, releasing bitterness, and refusing to let unresolved anger grieve your Spirit in me. Make my conflicts, when they come, a place where love grows. In Jesus' name, amen.