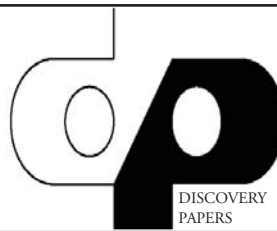


RESOLVING CONFLICTS (OR NOT)

SERIES: ONE NECESSARY THING



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Judges 11:12-28
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Bill Thrall, who is now an author, had been married for five years when he came home one day from his job as a management consultant to his wife, Grace, who greeted him with a blunt directive:

“We need to go for a ride.”

“What about the kids?” Bill asked.

“I took care of them,” Grace replied. “They’ll be fine.”

Bill headed for the car while worrying, “What did I do? What did she find out about me that I haven’t told her?” By the time he settled behind the steering wheel, he was already perspiring as he compiled a mental list of initial defenses and alibis.

“Where to?” he asked.

“Drive north,” she said.¹

Sounds ominous, doesn’t it? From Grace’s words and actions, Bill assumed that she had a serious problem with him, but before finding out what it was, Bill’s mind went into overdrive.

How might Bill and Grace resolve their issue? How might we attempt to resolve the conflicts that emerge in our interpersonal relationships? Judges 11:12-28 is a lesson in interpersonal communication and, more particularly, conflict resolution.

In response to aggression by the Ammonites, the leaders of Gilead, Israelites east of the Jordan River, sought to persuade Jephthah, a skilled warrior, to lead them, even though he was an outcast and an outlaw. Jephthah consented, but only after wresting from the leaders a pledge to make him their political leader. So, how will Jephthah deal with the Ammonite threat?

Ask a question

Judges 11:12-13:

¹²Then Jephthah sent messengers to the Ammonite king with the question: “What do you have against me that you have attacked my country?”

¹³The king of the Ammonites answered Jephthah’s messengers, “When Israel came up out of Egypt, they took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, all the way to the Jordan. Now give it back peaceably.”

When someone accuses you, how does it feel? Sometimes, an accusation provokes all sorts of emotions that cloud our thinking. If an accuser causes us emotional pain, our first instinct may be to defend ourselves or to accuse the accuser. What happens then? Your counteraccusation provokes another counteraccusation, and the conflict escalates until no one remembers how it began in the first place and the truth becomes all but irrecoverable.

Notice, though, what Jephthah does in response to the Ammonite threat. He doesn’t defend himself, and he doesn’t rally the troops. Instead, he asks a question of the king of the Ammonites in order to discern the reason for their hostility.

By contrast, Bill Thrall, who went for a “ride” with his wife, was rallying the troops and readying his defense as they drove north:

We drove for what seemed like the longest thirty minutes of my life. Neither of us said a word until she instructed me to pull over into an almost-empty parking lot. ...

After a long pause, Grace finally spoke.

“I want you to know that I am extremely unhappy in our marriage.”

“What?” I interrupted. “I’m a good father. I work hard for my family. We’re making a lot of money. We’re deeply involved in youth ministry. How can you say you’re not happy?” ...

Continuing to vent my angry response, I blurted out other personal accolades to elicit remorse from her. But they didn’t work. So I got out of the car and stormed around, playing the wounded-spouse role to the hilt. How dare she! I grumbled to myself. When I finally got back into the car, Grace was still peaceful, completely unmoved by my antics. Then, very simply she asked, “Don’t you want to know why I am so unhappy?”

“Well... uh... yes,” I responded. “That would be a good place to start.”²

The importance of asking questions in interpersonal relationships, especially those that are given to conflict, cannot be overemphasized. If someone accuses you, instead of defending yourself or mounting a counterattack, ask the other person to state as clearly as possible the issue as he or she sees it. We tend not to ask questions, especially questions of accusers, because we know that if we do so, we open ourselves to the possibility of receiving more painful information.

The king of Ammon answers Jephthah's question by claiming that the land in question, a twenty- by fifty-mile strip east of the Jordan River, between two of its tributaries, belonged to his people before the Israelites took it from them, and he advises Jephthah that all will be well if the Israelites will now kindly vacate the premises. In other words, “Get off my land!”

Now that the king has answered Jephthah's question, it's Jephthah's turn to speak.

Jephthah listens

Judges 11:14-27:

¹⁴Jephthah sent back messengers to the Ammonite king, ¹⁵saying: “This is what Jephthah says: Israel did not take the land of Moab or the land of the Ammonites. ¹⁶But when they came up out of Egypt, Israel went through the wilderness to the Red Sea and on to Kadesh. ¹⁷Then Israel sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying, ‘Give us permission to go through your country,’ but the king of Edom would not listen. They sent also to the king of Moab, and he refused. So Israel stayed at Kadesh.

¹⁸“Next they traveled through the wilderness, skirted the lands of Edom and Moab, passed along the eastern side of the country of Moab, and camped on the other side of the Arnon. They did not enter the territory of Moab, for the Arnon was its border.

¹⁹“Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, who ruled in Heshbon, and said to him, ‘Let us pass through your country to our own place.’ ²⁰Sihon, however, did not trust Israel to pass through his territory. He

mustered all his troops and encamped at Jahaz and fought with Israel.

²¹“Then the LORD, the God of Israel, gave Sihon and his whole army into Israel's hands, and they defeated them. Israel took over all the land of the Amorites who lived in that country, ²²capturing all of it from the Arnon to the Jabbok and from the desert to the Jordan.

²³“Now since the LORD, the God of Israel, has driven the Amorites out before his people Israel, what right have you to take it over? ²⁴Will you not take what your god Chemosh gives you? Likewise, whatever the LORD our God has given us, we will possess. ²⁵Are you any better than Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab? Did he ever quarrel with Israel or fight with them? ²⁶For three hundred years Israel occupied Heshbon, Aroer, the surrounding settlements and all the towns along the Arnon. Why didn't you retake them during that time? ²⁷I have not wronged you, but you are doing me wrong by waging war against me. Let the LORD, the Judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites.”

From the way that Jephthah responds, it's clear that he has listened to the king's answer. Some might say, “Well, of course he listened. He asked a question and he wanted to know the answer.” Not everyone who asks a question, especially a question of an accuser, however, is interested in the answer.

Many of us are afraid of the answer. The reason we don't ask a question is the same reason we don't listen to the answer: emotional pain. Because we don't want to feel emotional pain, we instinctively activate our defense mechanisms when the other person speaks, and we don't actually listen to what he or she is saying. Instead of listening, many of us, like Bill Thrall, interrupt or, at the least, convert the other person's turn to speak into our turn to prepare to speak. We pretend to listen, gesturing appropriately, but in reality, we're simply formulating our next sentence, which often takes the form of our next accusation.

Just as the importance of asking questions cannot be overemphasized, the importance of listening cannot be overemphasized. If you're going to resolve a conflict, you have to deal with the truth, and in order to deal with the truth, you have to not assume that you have a corner on it. You have to listen. You have to open yourself up. You have to receive information, even painful information.

In order to speak accurately, you have to hear accurately. If you don't hear accurately, you'll simply be talking past the other person.

Listen to the answer

So, why was Grace so unhappy with Bill? Bill, recalling Grace's answer, continues:

"You will not let me love you," she replied. Then, after a brief pause, "You do not even try to trust me. I love you. I want to be all I can for you, but you won't let me. Please hear me.

Tears filled her eyes. "This is so serious," Grace continued. "You cannot just love me. To have a relationship, I have to be able to love you!" She explained how my inability to trust was slowly decaying our marriage, my relationship with the children, and my influence.

For five years I had kept my life hidden from Grace. I tested her love in many ways, not willing to believe it could be trusted. I felt she would not be able to handle the real me. Each rejection of her sincere, loving attempts to win my heart caused Grace tremendous pain. Yet instead of condemning me or putting me down, she responded with strength and commitment. She gave me a safe place to trust, to give her access to my life, to be loved. For the first time, I chose to trust Grace with me. This began the journey of resolving my issues of mishandling our funds, my attempts to "look good," and my addiction to pornography.³

Grace's problem was different from what Bill assumed it to be. Bill, with a little prodding from Grace, asked her a question; she answered the question; and he listened to the answer. Thus, their relationship headed in a new direction.

Ask a question. Listen to the answer. Finally, tell your story.

Jephthah tells the story of Israel

Jephthah, who proved himself a skilled negotiator in his dealings with the leaders of Gilead, tries his hand with the king of Ammon. Jephthah sends messengers to the king, informing him that he's got his facts wrong. In so doing, he draws on Numbers 20-21 and Deuteronomy 2 to tell the story of the Israelites' journey from Egypt to Canaan, the land that the Lord had promised them.

The Israelites sought permission from the kings of

Edom and Moab to cross their land on their way to the Promised Land, but the kings turned them away. Instead of attacking, the Israelites skirted the lands of Edom and Moab and took a less direct route. They made the same request of the king of the Amorites, but instead of simply refusing the request, the king interpreted it with suspicion and attacked the Israelites. Because of the Lord's empowerment, the Israelites defeated the Amorites and took possession of the land, from the Arnon River in the south to the Jabbok River in the north, from the wilderness in the east to the Jordan River in the west.

According to Jephthah, the land in question first belonged to the Amorites, not the Ammonites. In fact, in Jephthah's recounting of Israel's journey to the Promised Land, the Ammonites were never even in the picture. Jephthah's account features three nations, none of which was named Ammon. Furthermore, in each case, the Israelites sought peace, not war. Jephthah implies that they aren't seeking war in this case either and that the Ammonites, not the Israelites, should withdraw "peaceably."

Although the Israelites hadn't originally sought to possess the Amorites' land, now that the Lord has given them the land, they have no interest in leaving it, especially to the upstart Ammonites who never possessed it in the first place. And, by the way, Jephthah wants the Ammonite king to know, if you contend with Israel over this land, you'll be contending with the Lord, the God of Israel, and he's so powerful that he won a decisive victory on behalf of those who had no inclination to fight for the land in the first place. If the king of Ammon insists on pressing his case against the Israelites, then Jephthah wants him to get the impression that the same thing will happen to him that happened to the Amorite king.

Jephthah advises the Ammonite king that he should be satisfied with the land that his god gives him.⁴

Although Sihon, the Amorite king, made a tragic mistake by attacking the Israelites, Balak, the king of Moab, determined that discretion was the better part of valor. Jephthah is asking the king of Ammon: will you be like Sihon of the Amorites and go down to defeat or like Balak of the Moabites and live to fight another day?

Finally, Jephthah reminds the king that Israel has been in possession of the land in question for three hundred years. That the Ammonites have waited so long to press their case illustrates the illegitimacy of it.

Jephthah summarizes his message by contending that the king doesn't have a leg to stand on and by warning

him that he will have to deal with the Lord if he insists on tangling with the Israelites. With that, Jephthah puts the ball in the court of the Ammonite king.

Tell your story

In interpersonal relationships, especially those that are given to conflict, you ask a question and then you listen. Finally, you speak: you tell your story, explaining the facts as best you understand them. What do we learn from Jephthah's message to the king of Ammon?

First, if there's a back story that sheds light on the current issue, tell that, too. Notice that Jephthah's account predates Israel's conflict with Ammon. Second, communicate what your intentions have been. Again, take note of Jephthah: he communicates that the Israelites' intentions, as they journeyed from Egypt to the edge of the land of Canaan, had been entirely peaceful. Conflicts are often based on the misunderstandings, so it's important to communicate your intentions and re-communicate them if necessary. Bill, for example, misunderstood Grace until he allowed her to communicate her intentions. Third, in the manner of Jephthah, explain how you have seen the Lord in this story. Finally, after telling your story, trust the Lord for the outcome. Take Jephthah's words to heart: "Let the Lord, the Judge, decide the dispute."

Of the three—asking, listening, and speaking—speaking is the easiest, the most natural. Information is like stimuli, and a stimulus invariably provokes a response. When the physician hits your knee in the right place, your leg moves. If you listen to what someone says, your mouth moves. If you don't listen to what someone says, your mouth still moves—but in the wrong way. Bill, for example, spoke poorly until he accurately understood what his wife was saying.

Back to Jephthah and the king. Now that Jephthah has spoken, how does the king respond?

When peace isn't possible

Judges 11:28:

²⁸The king of Ammon, however, paid no attention to the message Jephthah sent him.

The king of Ammon does exactly what you're not supposed to do in interpersonal communication: he doesn't listen. He "paid no attention to the message." In fact, the king didn't ask Jephthah a single question. Simply, he wasn't interested in Jephthah's story. The king's response—

or lack thereof—indicates the validity of Jephthah's case. In the end, who's right and who's wrong doesn't interest the king; he's only interested in the land that the Israelites possess. So, war it will be.

Perhaps we'd like to believe that taking the right approach will guarantee desired results. One could hardly fault Jephthah for his dealings with the king, but he was unable to dissuade the king from his hostile intentions. Some people don't ask questions. Some people don't listen. Some people are so committed to a course of action that they can't be bothered with the facts.

We learn an Ammon-like approach to communication from our families, the media, and even our national discourse. Take our political debates. Instead of answering the question put to him, the candidate pivots away from it and delivers his stump speech. Instead of speaking within the allotted time, he talks right through the stop sign. Instead of remaining quiet when his opponent is speaking, he interrupts to immediately correct supposed inaccuracies.

When our best efforts fail to resolve a conflict, the words of the apostle Paul come to our aid: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). Sometimes, living at peace isn't possible. You have to do what Jephthah did: Let the Lord deal with the issue.

Open up

The directives that emerge from this passage—ask, listen, and speak—won't win the day unless something happens to our hearts. If we don't ask, listen, or speak well, it's probably because we're defensive. What are we defending? We're defending our hearts. Against what? Emotional pain. I have noticed that I sometimes get drowsy when criticism is being directed toward me. It doesn't take a psychoanalyst to understand what's going on. I don't like what I'm hearing, so I'm shutting down. What do I need? What do we need?

Quite simply, we need the love of God. The simple reality is that it doesn't matter what anyone thinks of you. Really, it doesn't matter. What matters is what God thinks of you. What does God think of you? He thinks you're worth the unimaginable physical and emotional pain that the cross caused the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The fact that you may disappoint him, like a child disappoints his father, does not change in the least his furious, relentless, and boundless love for you. If criticism makes you feel worthless, God says you're worth everything, whether or not the criticism is valid. Therefore, it is imperative that we come before God on a regular basis

to open our hearts as wide as possible to receive his love. If we want to ask, listen, and speak better, we must open our hearts to the crucified love of God.

Consider the meal that Jesus gave us, consisting of bread and wine, which represent his broken body and his shed blood. The meal, which we partake of in remembrance of Jesus, makes the love of God tangible. You can see it. You can touch it. You can smell it. You can taste it. You can chew it. You can hear it. You can swallow it. You can even digest it. A more physical, intimate, and personal expression of love can hardly be imagined than the Lord's Table. Next time you partake, when you reach out your hands for the bread and the cup, reach out for God's love, and when you open your mouth, open your heart.

What if opening up to God's love doesn't make us less defensive? What if we spend hour upon hour receiving God's love and our asking, listening, and speaking don't improve. I endeavor to open my heart to God's love on a regular basis, and I still sometimes get drowsy when I'm being criticized. So what? Regardless of the results, when you come before God, you are doing what you must do. Rest assured that not one second spent opening up to the love of God is ever wasted. If your defensiveness, and your inability to ask, listen, and speak well, drives you into the presence of God, then praise him for your defensiveness.

In the presence of God: there's no better place to be.

NOTES

¹Bill Thrall (Alan Andrews, general editor), *The Kingdom Life* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2010), 62-63.

²Thrall, 62-63.

³Thrall, 62-63.

⁴The book of Deuteronomy, which predates the book of Judges, contends that the Lord alone determines the boundaries of nations (Deuteronomy 32:8-9). Whether Jephthah was ignorant of the scriptures or simply being diplomatic is a matter of conjecture. Furthermore, Jephthah identifies the god of Ammonites as Chemosh, whereas other biblical references identify him as Milkom (1 Kings 11:5, 33; Zephaniah 1:4-6). Is Jephthah ignorant or insulting? Or, were the Ammonites at this time mixed up with Chemosh? The narrator seems unconcerned with these questions.