

CONFLICT RESOLUTION *AND THE LAW OF LOVE* IN THE CHURCH

Video Lecture Series

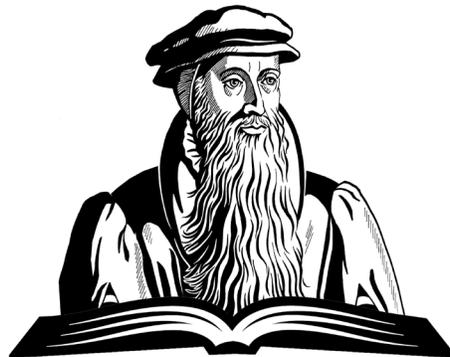
by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Module 1

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CHURCH

Lecture 3

Repentance, Confession, and Forgiveness



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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CONFLICT RESOLUTION *AND* THE LAW OF LOVE IN THE CHURCH

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by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Module 1 ~

Conflict Resolution in the Church

1. Introduction
2. Jesus' Instructions for Confrontation
- 3. Repentance, Confession, Forgiveness**
4. Surrounded with Prayer and Love
5. Excommunication and Restoration

CONFLICT RESOLUTION *AND* THE LAW OF LOVE IN THE CHURCH

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Module 1 ~ Lecture 3 **Repentance, Confession, and Forgiveness**

Welcome to our third study on Conflict Resolution among believers, as laid out by the Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, in Matthew 18, and particularly, verses 15 to 17. Now before we dig deeper on the Lord's directions, let me try to convince you of the five rich blessings and benefits that flow from Biblical confrontation. This is to motivate us.

First, dealing with sin honors the Lord of glory. As God's holiness is his beauty, so any neglect of holiness makes the cause of God contemptible. Now the second motivation is, dealing with the sinner saves the sinner from death, and stops the rippling effects in the wake of any sin. We noted that in a previous lecture, of James 5, verse 20, "Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins." Now, the third motivation, dealing with sin benefits the offended. Jesus points out this encouragement, in Matthew 18, verse 15: you will gain your brother. And fourth, dealing with sin benefits the whole household of God—think of that. If there remains an Achan in the camp, like in Joshua's day, the whole family of God will suffer (Joshua 7). And Jesus warns about that, in the passages in Revelation 2 and 3, about holding onto false teachers or teachings. If they would not deal with those matters, the Lord would abandon them as a whole. And lastly and fifthly, dealing with sin even benefits the world, as they see the testimony of love and forgiveness, and that testimony will be unimpaired, when we resolve it. Jesus declares, in John 13, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (verses 34 and 35). What a powerful testimony to the King and his glory in such genuine and working love, also in the resolving of conflict.

So, let's recap what we have learned so far in Matthew 18, verse 15, "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone." Now we have observed that our confrontation needs to be, first of all, soaked in love. According to Ephesians 4:15, we are to speak the truth, but in love. Second, it actually needs to be quick. Jesus' command is "Go," and in the original Greek, it has the meaning of, "be going"—don't delay; don't postpone

this confrontation. Thirdly, the confrontation should be purposeful: “Go and tell him his fault.” The purpose of the meeting is not to have a nice talking time, or a nice time for looking for an opportunity to broach the subject, if it comes up. No, our talk needs to be purposeful, to resolve an issue of sin. Therefore, be direct, and ask the person, “When is it a good time for you and I to talk about this issue that is on my heart?” Fourth, it needs to be verbal, for we are to “tell him his fault.” The Greek original “tell,” has the meaning of “reprove,” which is therefore, you are to seek to convince the person of his or her wrongdoing that’s hurting you and others. So let’s remind each other that problems are not solved by gestures, or by ignoring, or by avoiding the subject, or any other nonverbal communications. The Lord expects us to discuss it intentionally and Biblically. Now fifthly, he says it needs to be private—it’s “between thee and him alone.” We need to do this to protect the name of the offender, and therefore, our Lord commands us to keep the fault private, among the offender and yourself.

So let’s now trace further how our Lord wants us to approach conflicts, and drawing herein a few other scriptures where God enlarges on this subject. Now, we need to come in the spirit of the Apostle, as we confront each other. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 2, verse 4, as he reflects on his brotherly admonishment he had to give in his previous letter. Note in these words the feelings of his heart. He says, “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote unto you with many tears; not that you should be grieved, but that ye might know the love which I have more abundantly unto you.” Friends, what a difference will it make, when we deal with each other with such anguish of love.

Now, we also need to be gentle, we need to be meek, as pointed out in Galatians 6, verse 1. There we read, “Restore such an one in the spirit of meekness.” Now a person caught in sin is like a person with his bone out of joint—out of its socket. Now if we don’t deal with that bone out of the socket wisely, our efforts to restore can end up in more or even permanent damage. So, be gentle. We need to, therefore, be meek and humble, as Galatians 6:1 indicates. And how? “considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” You and I are capable to fall into the same sins if the grace of God doesn’t keep us back from our own sinful remnants of the indwelling old man. Once, two brothers—let’s call them Senior and Junior brother—were on their way to confront an erring brother about his sin. And while driving, Junior remarked, “I simply don’t understand how our brother could commit such a sin.” Now, upon hearing this remark, Senior, who was driving the car, stopped the car and made a U-turn to return home. So Junior, somewhat surprised, asked, “Why are you going back? Did you forget something?” And Senior’s answer was very instructive, “No, I haven’t forgotten anything, but I’m going back to seek another brother to go along, for you don’t have the right mindset to plead with our erring brother.” Now that’s a powerful lesson.

So, lastly, therefore, we need to be prayerful. All our loving confrontations should be soaked in prayer. Plead with God; beg him to glorify himself through all this confrontation. Plead that the fruit of the Spirit may adorn your meeting with each other. Plead that love may dominate all speech, that longsuffering patience may control us, that gentleness may characterize all the interactions, that goodness and meekness may govern both of us as we speak about it. Pray that faith or faithfulness to the truth will guide us, and that self-control be displayed, and finally that joy and peace may crown all the efforts. Soak yourself in prayer. And the crown of all these labors on this private level is what Jesus described in these encouraging words, “If he shall hear thee”—follow thee—“thou hast gained thy brother.” What a wonderful motivation is this prospect, to restore one from the path of sin, and to be reconciled to each other.

Now, for full reconciliation to take place, we are also to consider what the Lord teaches us in

Luke 17, verses 1 through 5. So let's pull in this passage of our Lord's will, which is so crucial to conflict resolution. Jesus begins his instruction by reminding us of the reality of this life. In Luke 17:1, he says, "It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come!" In other words, Jesus recognizes that offenses are unavoidable, even among his own people. It cannot but happen, for our sanctification is not complete till heaven. In each household of God, there will be sins that grate, that offend, that wound, or that threaten the unity. We need to remind ourselves that God's visible church on this earth is not a museum of perfect saints. No, we are to consider the household of God, the church we are a part of, a construction zone, in which God, through his Word and Spirit, is perfecting his people. And, friends, not until God moves his people from grace to glory will there be perfection.

And yet notice that Jesus doesn't soft-peddle the sins found among his people here below. He says, "But woe unto him, through whom these offenses come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones." Now this among the fiercest language by our most gentle Savior. The warning is clear: Don't touch those little ones or lead them astray. But then the Lord turns his attention to the offender, in Luke 17, verse 3, "Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him." What Jesus didn't add in Matthew 18, is what he added in Luke 17: "and if he repent, forgive him."

Now repentance is what we desire to see in our offending or trespassing brother or sister. Repentance is a change of our mind that leads to a change of action. Upon taking ownership of the sin, repentance is expressed in a confession, as well as a petition for forgiveness. Now, in repentance, you humble yourselves before the offended, and you say something like, "Yeah, I now see the way I talked, or the way I acted to you was very wrong, was very hurtful, and was sinful. Yeah, I was wrong! I've done this wrong, I've sinned to you in doing this," and then name the sin. And that should be followed with, "Will you please forgive me?" Why is that so hard to ask—to ask someone to forgive you? Because you are a proud people. We hate humbling ourselves. Humbling ourselves and confessing you're wrong kind of feels like a defeat, doesn't it? However, such humbling, and such confession is a huge victory! Now, it's not your victory as the reprover, or it's not your victory as the repentant, it is the victory of the Majesty of heaven, who makes our hearts willing in the day of his power to humble ourselves. If, by God's grace, you master your own spirit, you are stronger than he that conquers a whole city by himself (Proverbs 16:32). Nothing is harder to our proud human natures but to humble ourselves before a brother or sister, and to name and to shame our sins, seeking their forgiveness. That's the goal. That's what we're looking for when we confront a sinner, either on the private level, or in the subsequent steps of public or corporate attempts to lead someone to repentance.

So, let it be clear that the exercise of forgiveness is also commanded, but only when there is an expression of repentance. Listen again as Jesus says, "And if he repent, forgive him." God does not forgive sin when there is no repentance in our hearts, and no confession with our mouth is made before him. It is the absence of repentance and confession that makes the sin against the Holy Ghost unpardonable. The sinner who committed this sin never comes to a returning and a repenting, and a seeking of forgiveness. And when there is no repentance, expressed in confession, and seeking God's forgiveness, even the Lord does not forgive the sinner. Although he is ready to forgive at all times, he does not forgive the sinner. And so, you and I are to be ready to forgive. We are to communicate with our words and our attitude. But actual forgiveness is only possible when there is repentance, followed with confession, and the asking for forgiveness.

So, if our private or our subsequent corporate confrontation results in the expression of

repentance, the Lord's unconditional command is, "forgive him." "To forgive," literally, in the Greek, means "to send away as far as possible, out of sight, as far as the east is from the west." To forgive, friends, is like sinking a sin into the depths of the ocean, from where it is irretrievable. To forgive is to put away the sin, so that you will no longer dwell on it. It's not saying, "I forgive you," while you hold onto a grudge and will treat the repentant sinner as if he still is your enemy, and have nothing to do with him or her. Now, to forgive as Jesus commands us is one of the hardest things to do. It's not in our nature to be forgiving. Never think, therefore, about forgiveness as a glib exercise of words. It is instead one of the most demanding exercises of love.

And just as a side note, this is even more difficult for those who have been deeply and permanently wounded by the sins of others. Not all sin is the same. To be lied against, or to be cheated, or to have someone steal your money, or slander your name, that's definitely sin. But to be abused, to be violated, to be shamed, to emotionally mutilate someone are sins that leave the person deeply damaged and lifelong scarred. And the lifelong effects will be with that person. In such cases, when sin has had such serious impact, let us never think or speak lightly about forgiveness. For such wounded hearts, extra-special grace is needed to truly, truly forgive. And even when such forgiveness is exercised, in such cases of abuse and mutilation of emotions, we need to remember that this does not always mean a complete restoration of a functional relationship in this life. Now, for the protection of the fragile and the wounded victims, safe distances may need to be maintained, even from those who have repented, and who are forgiven abusers.

To top this all off, our Lord concludes his direction about forgiveness with an astounding extension. Here it is: "And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him." Perhaps the disciples looked at each other with a big question mark in their eyes, "Really, Lord? Is this truly what you require us to do? Really? Who is sufficient to forgive like that, and to do it again and again? How can we be so loving and genuine and generous to do this time and again?" In Matthew 18, verse 21, Peter ventured to ask the Lord Jesus if seven times was the limit. The Master's answer on that question is even more stunning: "Jesus saith unto him"—to Peter and to us—"I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven."

Well, notice how the disciples responded to his "forgive multiple times"—"Lord, increase our faith." Isn't it surprising that they didn't ask for an increase of love? For it is clear that great quantities of love are needed to forgive seventy times seven! It is true we need great amounts of love to forgive a great many times. But where does such love come from? Such love only comes from Christ's Spirit living in us. It comes when we believe how God forgives us, willingly, joyfully, and repeatedly, at the greatest possible cost to himself. It may seem unrealistic that my brother would sin against me seven times a day, and come back to me seven times a day. My friends, it is not unrealistic that I sin seven times a day against God. How often do we fail to love the Lord with all our heart and mind and strength throughout the day? How often do I fail to love my neighbor, including my spouse, my children; certainly not my enemies, with the same love that Jesus loved his neighbors, even his enemies? Besides the sin of action, there are the sins of lack of action—there are the sins of omission. And therefore, in that light, even seventy times seven each day is not unrealistic in our relationship to God.

And do you see now the connection why the disciples asked for an increase of faith? If I daily live in the joy of the forgiveness of my staggering debt to God, it becomes much easier to forgive the small sins others do to me. Then it becomes even possible to do what is, humanly speaking, impossible, as Jesus said, "If ye had faith as a grain of [a tiny little small] mustard seed, ye might

say unto this [huge] sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you.” In other words, even if your faith in God’s magnificent forgiveness of your sins is as small as a mustard seed, it will enable you to show love to your neighbor in forgiving him.

And let’s remember that through forgiving my brother or sister, even though that may be difficult, it never carries the infinite cost God had to bear to forgive you. For him to forgive even one of our sins meant the cross-death of his only and well-beloved Son, Jesus Christ. And who of us can measure such love for us rebels, to sacrifice his Son to make our forgiveness possible. Seek grace to know, and to live, and to abide in the faith of God’s forgiveness of our sins for the sake of Jesus Christ. And only then will you and I be able to master the revengeful and the offended spirit against our brother who has trespassed against us, even if he did it repeatedly.

What if this personal confrontation does not lead to its desired goal? Well, in that case, the Lord Jesus lays out the specifics of our next actions, and we will consider that in our next study on this subject.

Thank you, and may God bless these words.