



Search Factory, an Australian based marketing consulting company, wanted to determine the search volume for some of Google's strangest search requests. For instance, here are some of the most interesting average searches per month. Notice the progression.

"Why did I get married?" -- 40,500 monthly searches

"How to mend a broken heart" -- 9,900 monthly searches

"How to have an affair" -- 5,400 monthly searches

"How to get away with murder" -- 1,900 monthly searches

"How to hide a dead body" -- 1,000 monthly searches

Certainly these searches tell us that the Angry Family is alive and well. It's an example of how marriages can sometimes slide from marital bliss to "Why did I get married?" to "How to hide a dead body." Or as Billy Graham's wife, Ruth Bell Graham once said, "I've never considered divorce. Murder, yes, but not divorce."

I think all of us if we are honest can admit that we at some time have experienced the Angry Family. Most of us can remember a season when we resided in the doghouse. We remember it being cold, lonely and we remember tossing and turning wondering how to get back into the family house. Some of us can right now remember sending a family member into the doghouse. And maybe in your mind you still think it was for a good reason. We all know what it is like to hurt our family members and be hurt by our family members. We may have long forgotten what was done that triggered the hurt, but we remember the hurt and we remember there was a conflict, a conflict that we felt unequipped to resolve.

Conflict!

For those of you who live in condos or apartments or don't own a dog and are wondering if we are going to talk about if CPC thinks it is important that we have pets, preferably dogs, the doghouse is a longstanding metaphor of a state in the family when unresolved conflict has driven family members apart. A doghouse is a symbol for a wedge driven between family members, a coldness, a separation, unable to live together in peace, a state of unforgiveness, a state of unrepentance, a state of irreconcilable differences, a state of pain, hurt, and anger. I liken the doghouse to a family trying to live under the same roof, but lacking intimacy and connection and joy due to unresolved conflict.

Let's look closer at conflict and do a quick analysis of the anatomy of a conflict.

Offense

An offense can come in any shape or size, anything from a disagreement over where to hang a picture, to a cruel comment about a person's weight. Sometimes the offense comes out of nowhere. How many times have you said something and as you were saying it, you wished you could stop or lasso the sharp words before they hit their target. Sometimes we offend and are totally surprised that our words and actions offended. The point is that offenses happen and they sting, they burn, they overwhelm. They come in all shapes and sizes, but they all wound. A loved one betrays you, a parent rejects you, a child doesn't call you, a spouse refuses to try again, a sibling won't change.

Hurt

For most of us who are offended, we have taken the time to think about it and stew over it. What develops is the emotion of hurt.

Anger

To be angry or not angry is not the issue. Certain offenses result in hurt and anger. We can deny it all we want. We can use less volatile words to express our hurt like "I'm disappointed" or "I'm frustrated." But the reality is that things happen and the only right response is anger. That's why in the Bible anger itself is not a sin. Jesus got angry at sin. Paul says, "Be angry (at the things God is angry at) but do not sin." So the anatomy of conflict leads to a fork in the road. We will be very creative and call them Choice #1 and Choice #2.

Choice #1 — In your anger sin. There are two words to describe sinning in anger. Both apply to our relationship to family members. *Orge* means the sin of brooding anger, not letting it die, holding a grudge, harboring bitterness, refusing to forgive. The other word for sinning in anger is *Thumos*. That is an outburst of rage at another, not at sin, but at another person.

Also in Choice #1 is Don't deal with it. Stuff it. Don't rock the boat. Don't be honest. Pretend. But when this happens the boat that you are wanting not to rock springs a leak. Avoiding conflict leads to a death, a slow death of attrition. Stuffing the pain to try to keep from tipping the boat might make the boat seem steady to those on the outside looking in, but inside, deep in the bowels of the family, leaks are springing up and the boat, whether we care to believe it or not, is slowly sinking.

Another Choice #1 is fight back. I have counseled many exhausted couples on the brink because they chose to fight because they don't have any conflict resolution tools in their relationship

tool box. Others view their Choice #1 as not fight, but flight. "I'm leaving" or "you leave" or "I'm calling an attorney, I want out." And usually, but not always, fleeing may stop one kind of pain, but here's the hitch—leaving to escape pain will likely take a whole lot of baggage into the next relationship.

Choice #2 is the obvious choice, but certainly not an easy choice. Choice #2 is "learn to resolve conflict as a God directs us in His Word." I want to ask you today to put on the back burner all the other voices we have heard about resolving conflict. Voices from your family of origin, voices from your culture, popular books you have read, talk show guests you have listened to. I want you to know this journey is not easy; nothing worth anything ever is easy. If conflict resolution were easy, the world would look a whole lot different than it does.

So how do we resolve conflict and defeat the Angry Family? The first difficult step is what I call Heart Preparation.

Heart Preparation

Turn in your Bibles to Romans 5:9-10. For any work of spiritual growth, we must stop pointing fingers, making excuses, blaming others. We must look to the greatest example of resolving conflict. We must view our relationship with others through the lens of our relationship with God through the work of Christ. Remember, before Christ we were in conflict with God. We were in God's doghouse. Before we can learn to resolve conflicts with others, we must first look upward to God.

Look upward

Romans 5:8 says, *"God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* So Paul tells us how much God loves us. In other words, while we were still in the doghouse, Christ died for us. God did the really difficult thing to resolve our conflict with him.

"Since we have now (right now, in the present justified) **been justified by** (by means of) **his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!** **For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son,** (idea is that the conflict is removed, man's sinful hostility to God is removed, and God's hostility to man's sin is removed. Paul uses the active voice of the verb here to remind us that God initiates the process of reconciliation. What is reconciliation? To make enemies friends. It's God that makes reconciliation possible) **how much more, having been reconciled** (here Paul refers to man and in the case of man, he uses the passive voice to drive home the point of God doing the heavy lifting of reconciliation), **shall we be saved through this life!"** (Rom. 5:9-10).

Verse 10 tells us that since God did the hard thing, the heavy lifting to reconcile himself to us, his enemies, we can have absolute confidence that we are his friends and that he will save those who are now his friends. *"Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body*

through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (Col. 1:21–22).

I don't know about you, but to know that I was in conflict with God and guilty and sentenced to the wrath of God, in the doghouse with God, and then to know that he initiated reconciliation—actually made reconciliation possible by leaving the main house and coming into the doghouse to rescue me and take me back to the main house with him—it makes me look at my interpersonal conflicts through the lenses of God's love for me, his power working in me, and his desire for me to be a reconciler, not an enemy.

So now that I have looked up as part of heart preparation, am I now ready to roll up my sleeves and start negotiating peace in my family? Nope, not yet.

Look inward

I'm not ready to look out at others until I first do the hard stuff of looking inward to check the status of my heart. I want to take us now to the Sermon on the Mount. This is Jesus' famous sermon on how we should live. It's practical advice on our topic of conflict resolution today, and the Sermon on the Mount gives us a vision, a taste of what relationships and attitudes and community life will be like when Christ returns and makes all things right.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? (Jesus is saying when we judge someone else critically, we can easily develop a false view of ourselves. Remember only God is judge, so when we put ourselves in the position of God it perverts our view of ourselves and others.) **How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?** (Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is confronting the self-righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Self-righteousness is the sin of spiritual blindness, or of a totally distorted view, because it looks directly at its own sin and still imagines it sees righteousness. That's the plank. We can't see the plank in our own eye, but everyone else can. The very nature of self-righteousness is to justify self and condemn others.) **You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye,** (examine yourself. Are you seeing clearly? What sin have you contributed to the conflict? Identify it. Admit it and then confess it. That's getting the plank out.) **and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."** (Only after personal reflection are we even allowed to identify the sin in our brother's eyes. We are to address it but not without heart preparation first.) (Matt. 7:3-5).

These are hard things to hear. These planks have various shapes and textures. How about pride? Not pride in one's country, or the success of one's child, but a type of pride that says, I run my own life, I don't admit any fault, I place blame for a conflict on the other person. Pride entrenches two people apart, unwilling to make steps toward peace.

How about shame? Shame isn't that I have done bad things. That's guilt, and guilt can be a good thing. Guilt in the Bible is described as Godly sorrow which leads to confession and repentance which are key steps in resolving conflict.

Shame is when we believe we are bad and unworthy people. Shame means I'm so bad I am not worth the effort for others to try to resolve anything with me. Whatever wrong happened it had to be my fault. It's an inferiority complex. I'm not worth the heavy lifting. The doghouse was designed for me. Shame comes from abuse, put downs, negative words that we internalize. They are false messages, lies that we believe—I'm less important than other people.

But that isn't what the Bible teaches. We are taught when we look up to believe the good news. I am made new, that my mindset should be different because I am a new creation, I have a new self, created to be like God in righteousness and holiness. As Neal taught us at our Summer Spiritual Growth Series, the only way to be released from shame at our inner core is to be released through regeneration. We need to see ourselves as new people of God, because that is who we are when we place our faith in Christ. I've been born again.

So we must go into our next step in the process of resolving conflict with others without fear. For many of us we know exactly what we should do to resolve conflict but we are bound in fear. Fear of rejection. Fear of failure. Fear of something brand new to some of us—intimacy and vulnerability.

We have done the heart preparation to look up, and then to look in, and now we are ready to look around.

Look around

We know intuitively that a key to resolving conflict is to understand each other. We are to be sensitive to how we treat others. It struck me as I was preparing this sermon that my unwillingness to reconcile with others will affect my relationship with God. And I am responsible for attempting to reconcile even when the one I may have offended hasn't come to me first. My internal sin, my perpetuating the Angry Family, can make my outward acts of worship not acceptable to God. Let's go back to Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:23-24).

The idea is go and make peace. So what does that look like? It begins with seeking to understand. No conflict can be solved without both parties understanding their opponent's point of view. Yes, we always see our point of view, and can't understand why the other person can't see our point of view as well.

Julie and I learned a valuable lesson on conflict resolution. Seek to understand and speak back to each other's point of view on the issue, and feelings on the issue. It's amazing how tension and anger melt away when each of us know that we are totally being heard and understood. It's amazing how fast that leads to reconciliation. For advanced conflict resolution as you continue to go

to your brother, seek to find a solution that both of you are excited about. Seek a solution where both of you win. This is heavy lifting, but the heaviest lifting should have already happened in the heart preparation we talked about earlier.

Julie and I have had our share of conflict, that's for sure. About seven years into our marriage I was pastoring and having a great time romancing the church, and she and I were just not communicating. I was doing premarital and marital counseling with a big plank in my eye. The counselor needed counseling. When God finally humbled me, we went to a counselor, and this guy taught us a ton of stuff about communication/conflict resolution without fighting, expressing our feelings in such a way as to not point fingers and blame, attack, or try to win. I believe what we learned from that counselor 20 years ago saved our marriage from drudgery.

I remember 10 years into our marriage, Julie and I were in a fight. Our oldest daughter was about 4 and she could sense the tension. I remember I took her to the MacDonald play-land and from her car seat in the back she said, "Daddy, just tell mommy you're sorry. Girls like that."

Seek (ask) and grant forgiveness

Let's go once again to the Sermon on the Mount. In the Lord's prayer we see that asking forgiveness and granting forgiveness is a hugely important spiritual practice. Without seeking and granting forgiveness our relationship with God is hindered.

"Forgive us our debts, (asking God for forgiveness implies confession. Sin that is not confessed cannot be specifically forgiven. Confession means to agree with, when we confess our sins we agree with God about our sins and that we are to want no part of them going forward) **as we also have forgiven our debtors"** (Matt. 6:12).

The principle is simple, but also sobering. If we have forgiven, we will be forgiven. We are to forgive because it is the faithful Christian life.

Remember the Beatitudes at the first part of the Sermon on the Mount? We as members of the family of God are blessed and receive mercy because they themselves are merciful. It's the same idea as "blessed are those who forgive, for they will be shown forgiveness." Then if you were thinking I was reading too much into the passage. Jesus doubles down in verses 14-15.

"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."

I can't finish this message today without giving you what the scripture teaches us about forgiveness and maybe even more importantly what the scripture doesn't teach about forgiveness. Forgiving others means:

Honesty about what sin has occurred. It helps no one to deny or cover up the hurt that was caused in how the conflict was handled. There is no peace without forgiveness. It hurts to think that a person got away with what they did, but when we honestly admit

what they did and accept in our hearts that we are to forgive, we cross into the spiritual realm. We become more like Jesus.

Forgiveness means keeping no record of wrong. Paul in 1st Corinthians 13 says love keeps no record of wrong. Total forgiveness is a choice to tear up the record of wrongs so resentment has no place to grow.

Forgiveness means refusing to punish or seek revenge. God is the avenger; he doesn't need our help. We are called to be merciful.

Forgiveness comes from the heart and it is not conditional on the heart of the other person. On the cross Jesus cried out to his Father, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." If Jesus would have waited for his enemies to feel guilt, remorse, he would have waited a long time, maybe forever. If those who hurt me do not want to have a relationship with me that I want right now, it isn't my problem, because I have forgiven them and I have done what I need to do before God. I read this week, "Forgiveness means it finally becomes unimportant to hit back."

What does forgiving others **not** mean? Excusing the sin as if it never happened. Remember, sin has consequences both personally and legally. God will forgive the debt of sin, and so are we to do so, but society may require another kind of debt such as restitution or rehabilitation. Your marriage or family boundaries may need to be adjusted to provide for the restoration of trust and safety in the house.

Forgiving does not mean reconciliation. Remember when we ask someone to forgive us for the hurt we have caused them we have no control over their response. We hope and pray for reconciliation, we stay patient and hopeful and never give up, but reconciliation takes two people. If the other person doesn't want reconciliation, then that is between them and God.

There are situations where it just isn't safe for someone who was hurt deeply and has worked through it and forgiven the person to reconcile. Maybe the person who inflicted the pain isn't repentant. Maybe the person who inflicted the pain isn't safe. I counseled a person through forgiveness and her former husband is in prison. He wants reconciliation, but she is afraid of him.

Seek reconciliation

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. But careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Seek to make your enemies your friends) (Rom. 12:17-18).

I want to leave you with a story. A daughter complained to her father about how hard things were for her. "As soon as I solve one problem" she said, "another one comes up. I'm tired of struggling."

Her father, a chef, took her to the kitchen where he filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Soon the pots came to a boil. In one he placed carrots; in the second, eggs; and in the last, ground coffee beans. He let them sit and boil, without saying a word.

The daughter impatiently waited, wondering what he was doing. After a while, he went over and turned off the burners. He fished out the carrots and placed them in a bowl. He pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. He poured the coffee in a bowl. Turning to her he asked, "Darling, what do you see?"

"Carrots, eggs, and coffee," she replied.

He brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. He then asked her to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard-boiled egg. Finally, he asked her to sip the coffee. She smiled as she tasted its rich flavor.

She asked, "What does it mean, father?" He explained that each of them had faced the same adversity—boiling water—but each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong, hard, and unrelenting, but after being subjected the boiling water, it softened and became weak.

The egg was fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting through the boiling water, its inside hardened.

The ground coffee beans were unique, however. By being in the boiling water, they changed the water. We change the water.

May I not become weak like a carrot or hardened like an egg. May I emit rich flavor when the heat is on. May I change the world around me.

That is the loving legacy we should all want to leave for the next generation—to make Angry Families peaceful families.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2014 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1401-8FC/S