

UPSIDE DOWN RELATIONSHIPS

Title: Part 1 – “The Only Way It Works”

Date: September 20, 2026

While everyone is saying “Hi” here in the house I want to say “Hi” to everyone joining us online or on our app! We think you are a part of our church family, so let us know how we can pray for you or serve you in any way that we can. You can let us know how, anytime, through the Care & Prayer tab on our app. Most of all, we're glad you're here today!

Well, I missed you guys last week. How cool was it getting to hear from my middle school youth pastor though, come on! When I asked Billy to speak I had to pause and ask myself, “Are there any stories he could tell that I don’t want church family to know about?” It was awesome though and I cannot wait to have him back with us.

If you have a Bible with you or the Bible app on your phone, join me in **Philippians 2**. Philippians chapter 2, verses 1-11 to be exact. If you are new to studying the Bible this was written by the Apostle Paul in 60 A.D. to a church in the city of Philippi. I'm going to read it from the NIV (the New International Version) and what I want you to do as we read this is to try and find yourself in what Paul tells us. SO, here we go, Philippians 2, starting in verse 1:

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. ⁵ ***In your relationships with one another***, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Turn to your neighbor and tell them, “**In your relationships...**” Now tell your other neighbor, “**Have the mindset of Christ...**”

Today we are beginning a brand-spankin’ new collection of messages that I have been so excited to prepare for and preach **because** for the next five weeks we are going to talk about your relationships. Like all of them. Your relationship with God, your marriage, your kids, your friends and your extended family—yes, even THAT one, the one you just thought of. We are even going to talk about this family right here, the church family.

We're calling this “Upside Down Relationships” and it is all about what to do when you've tried everything else. **BECAUSE** some of you have! Tried everything else, I mean. You've read the books, you've listened to the podcasts, you've tried the communication techniques and the date nights and the boundaries and the five love languages—you even figured out that her love language is Acts of Service and not Physical Touch, which was devastating news for you. “You mean grabbing your butt every time you walk upstairs doesn’t count as love! I’m ruined...” But you tried it all and maybe some things got better for a while, but I would also be willing to bet a bunch of other things didn't move at all.

SO, what do you do when you have tried everything else? Well, that’s when you need Upside Down Relationships, and full disclosure I stole that title from the Book of Acts. When the first Christians showed up in a city called Thessalonica, the people who opposed them dragged some believers before the city officials and made an accusation. Listen to this, Acts 17:6:

“These are the men who have turned the world upside down and have now come here.”

They meant it as an insult, but 2,000 years later, we'll take it as a compliment. Amen? Because Jesus really does turn everything upside down **INCLUDING** the way we love the people closest to us.

So, today I want to preach a message I am calling:

The Only Way It Works

As we lay the ground work for the next 5-weeks, I want to talk today about the only way Upside Down Relationships work. AND let me tell you what we are NOT going to do today. We are not going to talk about your marriage. I know, some of you brought your spouse specifically for that... that's week two. We're also not going to talk about your kids today, or your friends, or your in-laws... not yet anyway.

“Well, what ARE we going to talk about then because I really need some help and I thought this was going to be helpful?” AND it will be! But the place we have to begin is not where most of us want to begin. Because every relational issue, the marriage that's dying, the adult kid who won't call, the friendship that blew up, the church hurt that never healed—you go down any of those roads far enough, and you run into the same thing every single time. So that is where we are going begin.

There was a missionary from the last century named E. Stanley Jones (In 1938, TIME magazine called him the world's greatest missionary evangelist, he spent 70 years traveling the world telling people about Jesus, in fact, he was a personal friend of Gandhi). But near the end of his life, he wrote a little book called “Victory Through Surrender”, and in it he made this statement. He said:

“I cannot go down any road on anything with anybody who has problems without running straight into the necessity of self-surrender. All else is marginal; this is central. I only have one remedy, for I find only one disease—self at the center; self trying to be God.”

Any road. Any person. Any problem. It all runs into the same intersection. The self. Me, myself and I all trying to be the center of the universe.

And please hear me, the point of this message is not so you feel bad about your SELF. I am not saying you don't matter, in fact if you stay with me I'll show you why the exact opposite is true. But we have to feel the weight of the diagnosis before I can offer you the cure.

AND for Jones, the diagnosis to every problem was the self at the center, the self trying to be God. Meaning, the biggest problem in my marriage... is me. Not Cheryl, me. The biggest obstacle my kids face in having a great dad is not their schedules or their screens, it's the guy preaching this message. When I replay my arguments with people—and I do replay them, usually in the shower, where I am undefeated with every comeback—but the common denominator in every conflict I have ever been part of... has been me. I was there every single time. What a coincidence!

Come on, be honest. Have you ever noticed that? **Everywhere YOU go... there YOU are?**

There's an old phrase for this. It goes back to Augustine, one of the church fathers, and Martin Luther who picked it up and sharpened it a thousand years later. The Latin is [*in-koor-VAH-tus in SAY*] “incurvatus in se.” It means **the self, curved in, on itself.**

Martin Luther said that human nature is so deeply curved inward that it naturally uses everything—including good deeds and religion—to serve its own ego.

AND that's the Bible's diagnosis of the human condition. Sin isn't first a list of bad behaviors. Sin is a posture. It's a bend in the spine of the soul. We came off the assembly line designed to stand up straight, loving God with our whole heart, loving our neighbor as ourselves, BUT somewhere in the garden a long time ago, humanity bent inward. And now every one of us is born curved in on ourselves like a question mark.

And curved-in people... marry curved-in people. Are you getting this? Curved-in people raise kids. Curved-in people make friends, join churches, show up at Thanksgiving. Two question marks trying to become one flesh and then we're shocked that relationships are hard.

That's the tension of this whole thing right there. Every relationship you have is two selves negotiating. And every relationship book on the market, almost without exception, is trying to teach two curved-in selves better negotiation tactics. Better communication between two bent people. And listen, communication matters and we'll get practical in the coming weeks, I promise you. **But you can't technique your way out of a posture problem.**

So, the question for the ages—and I mean that literally, this is the question every religion and every philosophy has tried to answer—is this:

What do you do with the self?

“If I'm the problem, well, you might be the reason,” right? What do we do with the self?

Answer number one: eliminate the self. This is the answer of Buddhism and much of Eastern thought. The self, with all its desires, is the root of your suffering, so the goal is to extinguish it. Blow out the candle. And can I tell you something? There is a kernel of truth there because our appetite for more, more approval, more comfort, more stuff is a hungry monster that never says “enough.” Let's just be honest about it, I am a capitalist, but in Western culture we have become a whore for more.

SO, the East saw the disease clearly but here's the problem: the cure is a kind of death with no resurrection. Because you don't get YOU back. Buddha says the problem is the self, so get rid of the self. This is the equivalent of spiritual suicide! And even people chasing self-elimination end up competing at it. The self you kick out the front door of religion sneaks back in the side door wearing a disguise. You can be proud of how humble you're becoming. Right? Don't ask me how I know that. SO...

Answer number two: affirm the self. This is our cultures answer. This is the water we swim in. Jones summarized modern psychology's message in three commands: know thyself, accept thyself, express thyself. And sixty years after he wrote that, it's not just psychology anymore, it's every commercial, every graduation speech, every algorithm. Be true to yourself, you do you, follow your heart, speak your truth.

And again, hear me, there is real truth in that. Know yourself? **Yes, please, some of you are out here wrecking relationships with wounds you've never once looked at, and going to a little counseling to look at them would be one of the Godliest things you ever did.** Amen?

So, the self-awareness project is half right. But it's only half. Because here's what the affirm-yourself gospel can never deal with. What do you do when you know yourself... and you don't like what you found? What do you do with the guilt? What do you do when the person you've been most true to... is the person who blew up the relationship? "Follow your heart" in the secular context is fantastic advice right up until you remember where your heart has led you before. Your GPS should not also be your con artist.

Think about it, we are the most self-focused, self-expressed, self-branded generation in the history of the world AND by every measurement we have, we are also among the most anxious, most depressed, and most lonely. If self-fulfillment worked, this would be the happiest culture in human history, but have you looked around lately?

Even the skeptics see it. E. Stanley Jones loved to quote H. G. Wells—the science fiction writer, not exactly a church person—who admitted:

"Until a man has found God and been found by God, he begins at no beginning, and works to no end."

When the atheists start agreeing with the preacher, somebody should take notes!

SO, elimination fails. Affirmation falls short. Which brings us to a third answer... if you are taking notes today, write this down:

1. Jesus said the way to find yourself is to surrender yourself.

I promise this will all have a payoff for our relationships, but we have to begin here because this is the only way any of this works, it is through the surrender of the self.

Jesus was asked a lot of questions, and if you've read the gospels you know He almost never answered the way people wanted. But there's one statement Jesus repeated so often that it shows up in Matthew, in Mark, in Luke, AND in John. All four gospels. Do

you know how rare that is? The Christmas story isn't even in all four Gospels, but this is. When God repeats Himself four times, lean in. Amen?

Look at this from Mark 8:35, Jesus says:

³⁵ For whoever wants to save their LIFE will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Now here's a nugget for you. Depending on your Bible you might even have a little note at the bottom giving this way. But the word translated "life" there is not the Greek word for biological life, instead it is the word *psuchē* [**psoo-KAY**] which is where we get our word psyche and psychology. What Jesus is referring to here is your soul. Your SELF. The YOU-ness of you. The seat of your being.

So, listen to what Jesus is actually saying in the Message Bible: (Mark 8:35-36)

"Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. **SELF-SACRIFICE** is the way, my way, *to saving yourself, your TRUE self.*"

Not eliminate the self. Not affirm the self. Surrender the self.

And here's why Jesus' answer is different from both of the other answers. Elimination says the self is worthless, destroy it. Affirmation says the self is fine, celebrate it. Surrender says the self is priceless and broken which is exactly why you can't be the one holding it. You don't throw away a shattered masterpiece, and you don't hang it on the wall and pretend it isn't shattered. You take it to the Restorer!

Jones put it in one sentence that I want everyone to write down, screenshot, tattoo somewhere reasonable, I don't care:

"The self on your own hands is a problem and a pain; in the hands of God is a possibility and a power."

Your self, on your own hands is a problem and a pain. BUT your self, in the hands of Jesus is a possibility and a power. Meaning that the self was never the problem. Self-ownership was the problem. You were never designed to hold you.

Jesus said that 2,000 years ago and get this. Brain researchers have identified something called the default mode network. I have mentioned this before, but it is a

network of regions in your brain that switches ON when you're doing... nothing. When you're totally at rest or bored. This happens when you day dream and then catch yourself, you know what I am talking about? But get this, do you know what your brain defaults to in those moments? It doesn't default to gratitude. It doesn't default to the needs of others. It defaults to the self! My past, my future, my standing, what they think of me, what I should have said, what I wish I could do... The default setting of the human brain is self-referential thought. Your brain, left to itself, curves in on itself. Sound familiar? The neuroscientists found Augustine's [*in-koor-VAH-tus in SAY*] on a brain scan!

But the plot clots, because new research shows that overactivity in that self-focused network is linked with rumination and depression, meaning the brain stuck on itself is the brain most at risk. SO, what makes that part of the brain quiet down? Well, it is when you get absorbed in something outside yourself. One of the landmark papers on this, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, described it with this phrase, they said it matches the folk notion of "losing one's self in one's work."

These scientists, with millions of dollars of imaging equipment, discovered that the self-forgetful brain is the healthy brain and the self-obsessed brain is the suffering brain. Jesus said it on a hillside two thousand years ago for free. Whoever loses their [**psoo-KAY**] psychē will find it!

Write this down now:

2. The cross is not God's plan b, it's God's self-portrait.

At this point, some of you might be pushing back a little. And I get it, the thought of surrendering yourself to Jesus is scary. I mean can He be trusted, what is He going to ask me to do? Right? AND those are fair questions. So, let's pick our opening text back up. In Philippians 2, Paul says Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

Paul says that Jesus "made Himself nothing." In other words, He emptied Himself.

This does not mean Jesus emptied Himself of being God, like pouring the deity out of the jar. It means He emptied Himself INTO something. Into a servant's frame, into human skin—into a towel and a basin, washing the feet of men who would abandon Him by morning. The emptying wasn't subtraction. It was pouring, like a pitcher exists to be poured, God poured Himself out.

Now, stick with me here, we tend to think the cross was God doing something unusual. An emergency measure. A rescue plan God reluctantly executed when everything went sideways, it was His plan B because of our sin and selfishness.

E. Stanley Jones saw it differently, let what he is saying really sink in:

“God takes His own medicine, obeys His own law of losing His life and finding it by losing it. He goes from a cross to a throne, from a grave to a resurrection... The God of the scars becomes the God of the stars.”

Do you see what he's saying? When Jesus said, “lose your life to find it,” He wasn't handing down a rule He was exempt from. He was **describing what God is like!** Self-giving love is not something God does on special occasions, **self-giving love is who God has always been** and is at the core of the universe! The Father, Son, and Spirit, pouring into one another from before there was a single star to pour under. The cross didn't change God's character, the cross revealed it. It's not God's Plan B, it's God's self-portrait. Does that make sense?

Look what happens next in our text:

⁹ **THEREFORE** [Everyone say “therefore,” hold onto that...] **God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,** ¹⁰ **that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,** ¹¹ **and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**

Everyone say, “therefore.” Therefore!

- The cross, therefore the throne!
- Down, therefore up!
- Surrender, therefore victory!

It's the upside-down pattern stamped into the middle of the universe. The most trustworthy Being in existence has scars which means you are not surrendering your self to a stranger. You are surrendering to the God who went first!

Now, as we take all of this and move towards our horizontal relationships, don't forget this, number 3:

3. Surrender is vertical, the overflow is horizontal.

I need you to hear this, because next week when we start talking about marriage, this can get confused.

Everything I've said today about surrendering your self, that is between you and God. Vertical only. You never, ever surrender your self to another human being. Not to a spouse, not to a parent, not to your kids, definitely not to a boyfriend, a boss, a best friend, or even a church family. **Only God gets your surrender; people get your love.** Let me say that again, only God gets your surrender; people get your love.

Here's why that matters so much. Some of you have lived the counterfeit version of this message. You disappeared into a relationship. You handed someone your whole self and called it love, called it commitment, maybe even called it Christianity—and it slowly erased you.

Can I tell you something with all the gentleness and all the authority I can carry into this moment? That was not surrender. That was surrender to the wrong throne. Any relationship that requires you to vanish is not asking for love; it's asking for worship. And people make terrible gods. Every one of them, even the good ones. especially the good ones because you'll trust them longer.

SO, here's how the God-given design actually works, and this is the foundation for the next 5-weeks so don't miss it. Everybody say, "One surrender."

One surrender! Upward, to God, of your whole self, into the scarred hands of the only One who can hold it. AND then, say "then," out of a self that is finally safe, finally held, finally not up for grabs... from that one surrender relationships can thrive in the overflow. The overflow into your marriage, into your kids, with your friends and family, and into your church family.

You see, self-GIVING love toward people is only possible when the self has already been surrendered to Jesus! A drowning person cannot save a drowning person; they just take each other down. But a person standing on solid ground can pull anybody out of the water. When God is holding your self, you can GIVE yourself away all day long and never lose you, because you're not the one holding you! Amen?

This is why so many of our relationships are exhausted, by the way. We're asking people to do God's job. We hand our self to a spouse and are crushed when they drop it. Well, of course they dropped it, they're carrying their own! We hand our self to our kids' success, to a friend's approval, to a church's applause. And every one of those hands eventually shakes.

That's because there is exactly one set of hands in the universe with a perfect record of never losing what was placed in them! AND you can identify those hands by the scars!

SO, what do we do with this? In the coming weeks I am going to show you how self-sacrificing love is at the core of every relationship you have, but as we close out today I want to give you something you can do right now. Every morning this week, before your phone, before your coffee... OK, maybe during your coffee, I'm a pastor, not a monster, but I want you to open your hands, physically open them and pray one sentence:

God, I give You everyone and everything—starting with me.

Starting with me! Because come on, you'll give God everyone else first. You'll give Him your spouse, "Lord, fix them." You'll give Him your kids, your boss, your situation. That's easy, amen? BUT the very last thing on the altar is always the self. So, this week, it goes on first. For the next 7 days I want you to start your day by surrendering your self, first.

Jones taught that surrender isn't a moment you have; it's a habit you build. You keep handing yourself over until handing yourself over becomes who you are. Just being honest, most of us will pray it Monday morning and by lunch you will have taken your self back. That's fine. Pray it again Tuesday. This is not a transaction, it's a posture. It's physical therapy for a spine that's been curved your whole life. You straighten slowly BUT you DO straighten.

God, I give You everyone and everything—starting with me.

Let me close by telling you where this is going, because somebody in this room came in today barely holding it together, and you need to hear there is some hope. You've tried everything else. That's not an accusation; that's the subtitle of these messages because it's the truth of your life. You tried working harder on you. You tried expressing more of you. You tried protecting you, promoting you, medicating you, reinventing you. And you're tired! You are so tired because you were never built to carry you.

But there is a God, hear me, there is a God who looked at a world full of curved-in, self-gripping, exhausted people, and He did not shout instructions from a safe distance. He emptied Himself. He came down into the middle of our mess, took His own medicine, opened His hands, and let us drive nails through them. AND then He looked at the very people He was dying for and poured out love. AND on the third day, God the Father said "Therefore", and the grave lost its grip, and the cross became a throne, and the God of the scars became the God of the stars!

That God is asking for your self today. Not to erase you but to resurrect you. Whoever loses their life for His sake, say it with me, will FIND it. You want your marriage found? It

starts here. You want your family found? It starts here. You want YOU found? One surrender...

So, here's what we're going to do. If you would go ahead and bow your head and close your eyes. I want everybody in this room and everybody online to open up your hands, and in your mind put your self in them. Whatever that looks like for you, put your self in your hands and as we pray I want you to let go. To let go of your self. To surrender to the Upside Down Relationship.

[PRAYER TIME]