

Finding God's Peace in my Relationships

Welcome to **Week 4** of a **Stress Less Life**. We are on a journey to discover true freedom and peace so that the tyranny of stress doesn't dominate our daily life, robbing us of the joy that God intends for us to have. Through this series we are learning how to abide in Christ and to change the way we view our lives so that we can claim the promise God has for us in His word. Our theme verse for this series is

John 10:10 (NIV) 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have LIFE, and have it to the FULL.

If this is God's promise to us **ARE YOU THRIVING or are you just SURVIVING?** Because if we are not THRIVING we are living below what God has promised us and we need to allow Him to make some changes in our lives as we engage in a serious pursuit of trying to eliminate the things that are keeping us from doing so.

Last week we looked at how we can find peace in our FINANCES. Today, we want to deal with another area where we can become a little overwhelmed in life and that is with our RELATIONSHIPS.

When it comes to life we were made for community and for establishing RELATIONSHIPS. At the end of the day life really is all about relationships. Our relationship with God, our relationship with others and our relationship with those who do not know God. Here at VC one of our core values is **RELATIONSHIPS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE**. When it comes to our mission of **helping people become passionate about Jesus so they can lead others to Jesus** we recognize that relationships are vital to the process. But let's be honest, investing in relationships can be messy and lead to stress in our lives. Once again, looking back at a recent survey conducted by the American Psychological Association, 44% of Americans identified relationships as either a "very significant" or a "somewhat significant" source of stress in their lives. And this is not just in reference to romantic relationships either. Almost 50% indicated that family relationships were a high source of their stress. In the same survey, parents reported a higher average stress level than nonparents and parents in general were more likely than nonparents to say their stress levels have increased during the past year. So relationships can add to our stress, but they don't have to.

So as we take a look at stress in our relationships, how do we remove as many stressors as possible and how do we handle the remaining stressors so that we can receive God's peace and actually find life in our relationships? In order to help us answer these two questions we are going to explore TWO KEY REALITIES.

The first reality is this: **Sometimes in my relationships I need to change.**

When it comes to stress in our relationships the first place we need to start is with ourselves! Just like you can't do anything about your circumstances you can't do anything about how others act either. But you can do something about how you respond to the actions of others. We may not be able to do anything about how others are acting or about their behavior or their attitudes that may be causing you stress but you can do something about how you respond to others and their attitudes. In fact, have you ever considered that the reason relationships are so important in our lives is because God wants to use them to make us holy and the only way He can do that is by creating tensions that expose the selfishness and pride in our own hearts. I truly believe this is why God gives us marriage, the family and the church. These are all places that, if we are cultivating deep relationships, will absolutely expose our selfishness and pride so that we can allow God to heal the parts of us that are broken by sin. **We understand that we cannot fix what's broken in others but we sure can do something about what's broken in us.** So the next time you are experiencing stress in your relationships you need to ask the question, **What does God want to change in me?** This was the theme of what Paul was trying to say to in Ephesians 4.

Just to set the context for us and our passage, Paul was writing to a young church (6 years old or so) with believers who had been walking with Christ anywhere from 1 week to 6 years and they were encountering the normal relational tensions we all face whenever we have more than one person gathered together with differing views on life, different maturity levels and different socio-economic backgrounds. There were also some religious tensions as they now had Jews and non-Jews trying to worship together. Basically a powder keg of tension, division and certainly relational stress. Basically what we have here is a bunch of immature Christians trying to follow Jesus while trying to work out their relational stress and it was affecting their unity, their peace, and ultimately their joy. So notice what Paul says to them.

Ephesians 4:17-25 (NIV) 17 So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. **18** They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. **19** Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed. Paul is basically telling them that they can no longer act as they once did as unbelievers. The need to change! And he goes on to remind them that they have been given a new way to live and act.

20 That, however, is not the way of life you learned **21** when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. **22** You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; **23** to be made new in the attitude of your minds; **24** and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. They must put off their old ways and embrace the new way that Christ wants to establish in them, and we must do the same! In order to do that I want to give you FIVE questions you need to start asking yourself when you are experiencing stress in your relationships that will help you start looking at what God wants to change in you.

25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

Question #1 - Am I being HONEST in this relationship?

Are we being truthful with our feelings or are we holding something back? Are we communicating honestly with each other? Do we use words like “always” and “never” to exaggerate the situation when trying to make our point? Falsehoods only add stress to our relationships. Lying and falsehoods only add fuel to the stress fire.

Ephesians 4:26-27 (NIV) 26 “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, **27** and do not give the devil a foothold.

Question #2 - Am I holding on to ANGER regarding the past?

Do you have any built up resentment or unresolved issues where forgiveness has not been granted to the one who has offended you? Has this been discussed and resolved? Do we constantly bring it back up? Did we just bury it and are just trying to forget it? Unresolved Anger only adds more stress especially when we try to hide or suppress it. Is that person who is stressing you out with every little thing they do really about a past hurt that has never been addressed with them?

Ephesians 4:28 (NIV) 28 Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

Question #3 - Am I focused on what I can GET or on what I can GIVE?

Are you stressed because of what you are not getting out of the relationship? Honestly evaluate if this relationship is only important to you because of what you get or is it because the person is of great value to God. Do you give with the expectation of getting back or do you freely give without expecting something in return? How would things change if you didn't place an expectation on the other person? Can you give to them just because of who they are?

Ephesians 4:29-30 (NIV) 29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. **30** And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Question #4 - Am I eager to speak GRACE or to offer a piece of my mind?

Are you building up or tearing down with your tongue? Are you more often harsh and critical than you are gracious and life giving? Which brings you greater satisfaction? Harsh tongues only kindle the fire and fuel stress while grace diffuses the fire of hostility and alleviates stress. (Ex. work place with a harsh boss or a home with a critical parent)

Proverbs 18:21 (NIV) The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit

Question #5 - Am I dealing with this relationship in my own STRENGTH?

Ephesians 4:31-32 (NIV) 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. **32** Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Notice that vs 31 is the result of doing things in my strength. I don't know about you but I don't have to work very hard at the list here in vs. 31. They seem to come all to naturally. While vs. 32 is a little different. These are the results of doing things in the power of Christ!!

The first reality is **Sometimes in my relationships I need to change**. But there is a second reality we need to embrace and that is, **Sometimes the relationship needs to change**.

We must start with examining our hearts first. We must seek to do an honest evaluation by asking ourselves the 5 questions we just looked at and allow God to examine us thoroughly. But then there are times when it isn't you but it is the other person. What do we do then, especially if we can't change their behavior or their attitudes?

Well the Bible calls us to confront the situation with three important steps. Notice what Jesus prescribes for us:

Matthew 18:15 (NIV) 15 "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.

Step 1: confront them privately first. This means we should not be talking to anyone else about the issue before we have talked to them first. When we do confront issues of sin, notice the attitude Paul says we need to have **Galatians 6:1 (NIV)** Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.

Notice a few observations regarding Galatians 6:1:

- 1) The motivation is RESTORATION not REVENGE and thus you should not be doing it to make them feel bad or make yourself out to be something more superior
- 2) GENTLENESS is to be our tone. Not harsh or heavy handed out of frustration or to play gotcha.
- 3) Beware of PRIDE and the fact that you are capable of doing the same thing or may even have done the same thing in the past. In other words show mercy since God has shown you mercy.

One more note we need to make regarding this first step. This doesn't only apply to situations where someone has sinned against you. We also need to do this if you are made aware of an issue that someone has with you where you have sinned against them.

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

As mature believers it is always our responsibility to take steps that lead to and encourage reconciliation. Make sure that before you confront any situation you go to God about them and the issue first. Praying for them will make sure that your heart is in the right place to offer true restoration.

Matthew 18:16 (NIV)16 But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’

Step 2: if they don't hear you, take one or two others to confront them a second time. This is when they do not acknowledge that there is a problem. The extra witnesses help establish the issue that is to be resolved and they also are witness to the attempt to confront the issue.

Matthew 18:17 (NIV)17 If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Step 3: if they still don't hear, the matter is to be brought before the church to confront them a third time. If they are a believer and unwilling to hear the church then church discipline is to be brought at this point. Obviously this is so the church can pray for the situation to be resolved through the work of His Holy Spirit. They are also to treat the person as an unbeliever because they are acting like one and may even be an unbeliever. Treating them like a pagan or tax collector doesn't mean you abandon them, but that you realize they aren't in the same spiritual place as you and need to be approached with grace and prayer to help them know Christ. This means we may need to share the gospel with them, pray for their salvation, and ask God to use whatever is necessary to bring them to repentance because if we are not **PRAYING** for them we may very well be **PREYING** on them.

Let me close with a few side notes because when it comes to relationships we have a whole host of different relationship scenarios (in Marriage, regarding children, co-workers, neighbors, the church etc.)

If you have exercised **Romans 12:18 (NIV)** If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. yet the other party isn't allowing you to do that but instead is abusing the relationship making it impossible for you to experience peace. You need to seek advice from a pastor or Christian friend you trust.

In some cases, depending on the issues you may just need to establish some boundaries for the relationship. A counselor, a pastor or a friend should be able to help you do that. In other more severe circumstances you may need to step away from that relationship altogether. If you

are currently engaged in some type of toxic relationship that is adding stress to your life and you have allowed God to examine your heart and you have addressed the need for the relationship to change and you are still experiencing stress and do not know what to do next I want to encourage you to seek biblical guidance from a close Christian friend or from your pastor regarding what your next step may be.

I know this, God wants you to find peace and joy in Him! If the stress in your relationships is the result of your behavior then let God change you. If it is a change needed in the relationship then let Him change that. But let's pursue His promise and eliminate the stress in our relationships.

Invitation:

- 1) Do you have a relationship with Jesus? None of this works without Him.
- 2) Who is causing you stress? Is the stress a symptom of a problem going on with that person or a particular situation? We need to get to the heart of the problem, not just treat the stress symptoms.
- 3) Have you examined your own heart regarding the matter? What do you need to change?
- 4) Who are you in conflict with and have you exercised Matt. 18?
- 5) When it comes to the stress we are experiencing, do we want what God wants (reconciliation and healing)? Or do we just want relief or for that person to go away?

Wk 5 - Finding God's Peace in the Face of Spiritual Attacks

Wk 6 - Finding God's Peace in Circumstances Beyond my Control