

Playground
Play at Your Own Risk
October 25, 2015

PRELUDE – Who Is Like Our God
Worship Songs – Who Is Like Our God / What a Savior
Feature – Walk a Mile in My Shoes
Drama – Just a Little Different

Let's pray together.

God, we come to you today asking you to open our eyes and our hearts to the people around us who are different from us; people who, in our opinion, have a few quirks.

Teach us how to make allowances for *their* faults just as You in Christ have made allowances for *our* faults.

In His name we pray. Amen.

The “Rule” Explained

Good morning everyone.

Today we’re continuing in our series *Playground: Simple Rules for Getting Along With Others*.

And As Shannon said earlier, today’s rule is “Play at Your Own Risk.” <playground signs>

If you’ve ever been to a playground either as a kid or as a supervising adult, you’ve probably seen that rule posted somewhere. And the reason it’s posted is because a playground can be a somewhat dangerous place. There’s a little bit of risk involved for those who choose to participate. You can get hurt if you’re not careful.

That same principle is true when it comes to relationships. There’s a little bit of risk involved. There’s an element of danger. You can get hurt if you’re not careful because some of the other

folks on the *relational playground* are a little different; some of them are a little quirky; and some ... well, they're kind of like the kids in what I think is probably the greatest playground scene ever produced by Hollywood.

I'm sure you'll recognize it. Let's watch.

Video clip: A Christmas Story – Tongue Stuck (2.1 min)

Begin: Drums, trumpet with shot of US flag drops to schoolyard playground

End: Fades with Flick crying

I think I may have gone to elementary school with that Schwartz kid!

Point is ... some of the people on the relational playground are not only different and quirky like Aunt Lorraine in our drama; some of them can be downright unkind and mean. So, if you and I are going to play, we've got to play at our own risk.

Of course, when you're a kid on the playground,

if you're *too* careful – if you're *too* concerned about the risk, *too* worried about getting hurt – you're probably not going to have a whole lot of fun. To truly enjoy the playground you have to *play ...* in spite of the potential danger. You have to strike a balance between your fears and the prospects of a really fun time. You have to hope for *the best experience* at the same time as you're aware that *the worst experience* is also a possibility.

It works the same way on the relational playground because the truth about the people you and I do life with every day – at home, at work, at school, at church – is that, on the one hand, they have the potential to be incredibly good and helpful. On the other hand those very same people have the potential to be incredibly bad and hurtful. So we have to strike a balance between those two realities, which means that ...

To truly enter into and find joy in our relationships, we have to believe the best about people while, at the same time, being

fully aware that they are fallen sinners just like we are.

That's the principle. That's the rule.

If you don't understand this principle and incorporate it into your thinking, you will gravitate to one of two extremes in your dealings with people. You'll either be naïve and blindly trust and embrace people you shouldn't, or you'll be cynical and negative and not trust and embrace people you should. Either way, in the end, you'll lose.

And I've seen a lot of people wind up at both ends to their own peril.

For example, I was talking to my mother the other day about an email she got from some guy promising she could "make big money working from home" by becoming a selling agent on Craigslist. She was a little suspicious and wisely decided she needed to talk to him directly before sending any personal information.

After a few questions over the phone, she realized it was a scam and hung up. Then she ran the guy's name through Google and discovered that he and his wife had been in jail several times on fraud charges! Dozens and dozens of people had blindly trusted him and lost money. They were at the naïve end of the spectrum.

At the other end of the spectrum – the cynical negativity that hesitates to trust and embrace people – that's where *I personally* tend to wind up from time to time. Sometimes, it's a real challenge for me to believe the best because – and I've shared this before – in my job as a pastor – and I've been doing this for a long time now, over 21 years – I have seen so many people flame out and leave. They come to North Heartland and they're all excited because “this is such a wonderful church” etc. etc. And then they're gone and I don't even know it.

I'm like, “where is Joe these days?”

And my staff is like, “Oh, he doesn’t come anymore. He lost interest. He got transferred. He got mad at God. He got mad at you.” Or, “we don’t know either.”

And just to be clear, I don’t say this to be critical of anyone who engages with NHCC for a time and leaves. Over a period of 21years, *most people will come and go*. That’s nobody’s fault. That’s just life.

And that reality of life can make you cynical and negative about people and relationships. Kids grow up and get married. Friends move away. Family members die. And that stuff hurts.

When you play on the relational playground, you really *do* play at your own risk *just because of the realities of life* – to say nothing of the sinful nature of people that often causes even more pain!

So, as we get into this issue, I'm curious. Are you living near either end of the spectrum right now? Do you tend to gravitate towards one end or the other? Would the people who know you best say you're naïve? Would they say you're cynical and negative?

If you're going to make it relationally – if you're going to have a positive and fulfilling experience on the relational playground, you've got to move away from the extremes and into the middle. You've got to both play *and* realize that there's a risk when you do.

What the Bible Says

So, how do you do that? How do you believe the best about people – how do you stay open to their incredible potential for good – while, at the same time, being fully aware that they are fallen sinners – with the potential to be incredibly bad and hurtful?

To answer that question, I want to look at passage of scripture that became very important to me and our leadership team many years ago. In the first week of this series I told the story of how, at about five years into our existence as a church, God had awakened us to the fact that if our faith in Christ didn't impact how we as a staff got along with one another, we really had no business teaching anything to anyone else. And that started us on a journey of learning and awareness and we became much more sensitive to when things were not relationally right among us.

Since that time, God has had to whack us upside the head again every so often (spiritually speaking, of course) to remind us.

One of those times was in early 2003, right after we had purchased this building and property and moved in. At that point, this place was literally still a hospital facility. This room was a 40x50 gym and we were trying to actually do church in

it twice every Sunday morning. There was no commons area like we have now. And there was a lot of stress and tension in our staff trying to make it work and figure out what we would do to remodel the place.

Eventually, we had a big blow up that took many hours over several weeks to repair. As we dug into what had happened, we discovered that instead of believing the best about one another, we were believing the worst!

Shortly after that, God impressed on Kitti Homan, one of our associate pastors, that our staff might benefit from studying a passage of scripture that the Apostle Paul had written to the Colossian Christians. So we did.

Here's how it begins. Paul writes:

Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility,

gentleness, and patience.
Colossians 3:12 (NLT)

When I read that, I felt like God was saying to me, “Rick, as a congregation, you just clothed yourselves in brick and mortar. But I want more than that. I want you to clothe yourself in these qualities.”

And I remember saying, “That’s fine by me, Lord, because I don’t ever want to have this kind of mess again!”

The next verse says ...

Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.

Colossians 3:13-14 (NLT)

Now, there’s more to this passage (and we’ll look at it in upcoming weeks) but in these three

verses Paul gives us two practices and one big idea that are very helpful in believing the best about people in our lives (who also happen to be, by nature, 100% sinners).

The two practices, I think are very obvious.

Practice #1: Make allowances for each other's faults.

This means accepting people “as is” with all their weaknesses, quirks and oddities; all the strange things about them that you don’t understand and maybe don’t even like sometimes; and all the areas in which they are not yet submitted to God.

It means tenderheartedly, mercifully, kindly, humbly, gently and patiently saying, “in this life, they are probably not going to be everything I want them to be and that’s OK ... because in this life, *I am probably not going to be everything God wants me to be* ... and He has tenderheartedly, mercifully, kindly, humbly, gently and patiently accepted *me* as is.”

That's practice #1.

Practice #2: Clothe yourself with love.

If you're going to become a person who believes the best about people, you also have to become a person who is growing in your love for people.

Now, we'll take a look at both of these practices in a little more detail but let me give you the big idea in Paul's thinking here.

The big idea is that your relationship with God is what gives you the ability to do these things.

You can't miss this.

“God chose you and god loves you,” Paul writes in verse 12. And in verse 13 he adds, “God has forgiven you.”

This is about God's work in your life.

God is why you really can be a person who is full of mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, Paul is saying. Your ability to believe the best about others in spite of their flaws comes from the way God *has* treated and is treating you (which, again, is with mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience).

Of course, this assumes that we *really are* experiencing that kind of relationship with God ... which, you might remember, was the principle of the first playground rule we looked at – “Adult Supervision Required” – which said that in the same way that a kid’s experience on the playground is in large measure determined by how he or she relates to the supervising adult, our experience with others on the playground of relationships is determined by our relationship with God.

I’ll not go back through all of that this morning but I will encourage you that if you’re not sure

about your relationship with God (or if you were not here that week), I think it would be valuable for you to go to our website or our app and check out that message. You can't do the kind of thing we're talking about this morning without having an ongoing and healthy relationship with God. That's the big idea.

Assuming that is in place in your life – that your personal connection with God is healthy and is providing direction to you – let's talk in a little more detail about those two practices Paul gives.

Making Allowances

And let's begin with “make allowances for one another's faults.”

Practically speaking, how do we actually go about doing that? How do we accept one another “as-is”?

There are probably many things that could be

said but I'll share a few things that have been helpful to our pastoral leadership team over the years. These are ideas that keep coming up again and again as we wrestle with this concept.

1. First of all, to accept someone “as is” requires that you value the complexities of people in general.

- Some people like things to be neat and orderly. Some like their environment to be more unstructured.
- Some like to spend time talking with people, some like to work on projects.
- Some people are extroverted some are introverted.
- Some people like having lots of friends and acquaintances, some prefer a few close relationships.
- Some tend to worry a lot, some just go with the flow.

Psychologists have discovered that these kinds of preferences are hard-wired into people at birth.

In fact, we could all take a trip down the hall to the nursery, look at those babies and quickly separate the introverts from the extroverts, the thinkers from the feelers, the structured from the unstructured, and so on. It's hard-wired from birth.

And those are just the personality differences.

- People also have different experiences in life that eventually come to shape the way they perceive reality. (We saw a great illustration of that in the drama).
- People also have different needs emotionally. Some people are high-touch, some people need more distance.
- People have different leadership styles – how they will handle things if they get put in charge. Some people want to consult with everyone while others want to be directive. There's all kinds of styles.

The starting point in the ability to accept others

“as is” is to understand that all of those differences are valuable in some way or another ... which is a point Paul makes repeatedly throughout his writings to the early church.

Suppose the whole body were an eye—then how would you hear? Or if your whole body were just one big ear, how could you smell anything? But God made our bodies with many parts, and he has put each part just where he wants it. What a strange thing a body would be if it had only one part!

So, the eye can never say to the hand, “I don’t need you.” The head can’t say to the feet, “I don’t need you.” 1 *Corinthians*
12:17-21 [NLT]

Paul’s point was that in the church – in the Body of Christ – we need to value the complexities of people in general because God can use all of those characteristics to impact the world.

Along the same lines, we've learned that making allowances for one another means we have to

2. Differentiate between “rightness” and personal preference.

A lot of us get into our own patterns of how we like things or think about things or what we've experienced and we begin to think “that is right.” We associate the word “right” with that, and “wrong” with anything that is not that.

But here's the deal: Only God says what is right and wrong. You and I just have preferences.

The Bible is very clear about this principle. Paul once wrote to several churches admonishing them to not pass judgement on those who had a different preference.

*Accept him whose faith is weak,
without passing judgment on
disputable matters.*

A disputable matter is an issue where there is no clear right or wrong, or “thus saith the Lord”, and each person has to follow their own conscience.

Paul continues:

One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.

This was a big deal back in that setting because a lot of the meat that was sold at market had previously been part of an offering in a service of worship to an idol. Some Christ-followers couldn't bring themselves to eat it for that reason, but others reasoned, "there is only one God and his Son, Jesus Christ, so we know that an idol is just a piece of stone. Therefore, this meat wasn't really an offering at all, so it's OK to eat."

So Paul told them ...

The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him ... Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.

Romans 12:1-3, 13 (NIV)

If you're going to accept people "as is" you've got to differentiate between "rightness" and "preference."

Another thing we've learned (and this terminology comes from my friend, Pieter Van Waarde, who is pastor at Woodcrest Chapel in Columbia) is that ...

3. You have to “take both sides” of a person.

People are like coins, he told me. And coins have a head and a tail and you can't separate them. You can't take just the head. You have to take the tail, too, because it's connected to the head. You have to take both sides.

It works the same way with people. What's good about them (the head of the coin) is often directly related to what bugs you about them (the tail).

For instance, on our staff we have a person who has an ability to communicate vision and purpose to large groups; to motivate people to

believe that they really could be different, that God could really do something with their lives and they could be better than they are. This person is very comfortable in this setting.

But the other side of the coin is that this person is not always the most sensitive or compassionate in a one-on-one setting. Know who that person is? Yep, it's me.

We have another person on our staff with a great ability to organize and plan, to process a lot of information and make good decisions quickly. Very valuable to us in this stage of life as a congregation. But this person is not always the best at listening to details, and sometimes people get their feelings hurt by that.

We have another person who is a great relationship builder, great party thrower but isn't too attuned to details like turning in receipts for those parties.

We have another person whose attention to detail produces excellence in everything thing that we do publicly, but on the other side of the coin is sometimes too picky, and a worrier.

Here's the deal: You've got to take both sides. If you want the excellence, the parties, the good decisions, the vision-casting ... you've got to put up with a little bit of pickiness, some inattention to detail, some insensitivity. Not that those things are right and that people shouldn't grow beyond them, but it's just reality about people.

You've got to take the good and the bad. They both come out of the same part of an individual's personality.

Then – and this is the key – you've got to choose to believe that *they want to live out of the head side* and not the tail side of the coin!

For instance, in my case, I really do not intend to be insensitive. I really do not intend to be

uncompassionate. Those are the natural weaknesses of my personality and I know it. And if you're going to be on the playground with me, you have to believe that's not how I want to be.

And it works the same way with everyone's strengths and weaknesses. You've got to take both sides.

Another key to making allowances for the faults of others is to ...

4. Build “relational margin” into your life.

You know what margin is? It's the space on the side of the page that you're not supposed to write in. When you were back in grade school, the teacher took off points if you did. “Don't write in this space.”

Relational margin is kind of the same thing. It's emotional energy that you *don't use* in dealing

with people. It's space that you give yourself from relationships because relationships with imperfect people, over time, are draining. They cost you something. You have to invest emotionally. So, you have to keep some margin.

Now, the size of the margin may be different from person to person, but every person has to have it. Even Jesus had it!

Luke writes that as his ministry began ...

The report of his power spread even faster, and vast crowds came to hear him preach and to be healed of their diseases.

All these people, coming not just to hear him preach but to be healed. All these people he has to interact with one-on-one. It was overwhelming.

But look what He did.

But Jesus often withdrew to the

wilderness for prayer. Luke 5:15-
16 [NLT]

Why? Because He needed some relational margin. He needed to replenish his batteries. He needed to be alone and He needed to be with someone – in this case, His Father – who could pour back into him what he had poured out to others.

We're the same way. If we're going to be able to keep accepting others "as is" we need downtime and time with people who fill us up.

Ok, one more thing on this issue of "making allowances for the faults of others." We've found that it's very helpful to ...

5. Remember that they matter to God (as much as you do!)

He created them, just like He created you. As weird as they may seem, they are created in the

image of God.

And not only did He create them, He also sent Jesus to die for them and their sins on the cross, just as He did for you and yours. And He did it for them for the same reason He did it for you.

- Not because they deserved it
- Not because they were “normal” as you define normal
- Not because of any other reason than the fact *that they are dearly loved by Him.*

I think it would help us immensely if we could remember this; if we could remember that we’re dealing with someone for whom God put His Son’s life on the line. That person who is at times such a pain to you is of infinite value to the God of the Universe.

Well, those are some things that we have found

to be key to accepting others “as is” and making allowances for their faults:

- Accept the complexities of people in general.
- Differentiate between “rightness” and personal preference.
- Learn to “take both sides” of a person - and then believe they want to live out of the best side.
- Build “relational margin” into your life.
- Remember that other people matter to God (as much as you do!)

Maybe they’ll be of help to you. But remember that these are function of your own relationship with God. The more you draw near to and know God personally, the more these kinds of things become important to you. The more your heart begins to soften in these ways.

Clothed with Love

Now, at this point, someone might say, “OK, Rick, these things are all well and good but you really haven’t talked about anything that’s really painful. What about negative character qualities in people that are *more* than just personality quirks? What about behaviors that are *sinful* and put me at risk of getting hurt if I get too close?”

We’ll talk about that in great detail over the coming weeks but that actually brings us to the second practice Paul mentioned, which was “clothing ourselves in love.” More than just *making allowances* for people who have quirks and blind spots and weaknesses, we have to *love* people who are sinners.

No, that’s not strong enough. If we’re going to be able to be on the relational playground with people who aren’t always nice and friendly, *our basic disposition towards people has to be love, not fear*. We have to dress ourselves in love, to use Paul’s metaphor ...

... because here's what love does:

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Corinthians 13:7 (ESV)

- Love bears all things – it overlooks the sins of others as long as possible.
- Love believes all things – it believes the best about a person as long as that is possible. It knows that people tend live up to or down to what we believe them to be.
- Love hopes all things – when it gets to the point where it can't believe anymore, it takes a step beyond belief in the person and turns to God knowing that God has the power to change people.
- Finally, love endures when even hope is gone.ⁱ

Where do we find that kind of love? Again, it's rooted in our relationship with God.

For as we say again and again, blessed people bless, forgiven people forgive and loved people love.

Let's pray together.

<prayer>

Feature – Banner of Love

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Baptism coming up on November 15th.

Why baptism?

BTW, I put together some pictures for those who have never seen a baptism here at NHCC so you have some idea of what to expect.

We have a pool, get into it, get dunked, etc. etc.

Baptism isn't a kid thing – it's a grown up thing.

Sign up using the communication card in the seat in front of you. Give it to an usher on the way out today. If you have questions, stop and see me after church.

2. End of DST next Sunday – extra hour of sleep!

Endnotes

ⁱ From Ray Pritchard @<http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/2000-12-10-Love-Never-Gives-Up/>