

Playground
Use Equipment Properly
November 1, 2015

PRELUDE – Greater
Feature – Why Can't We Be Friends
Greeting – Nathan

Worship Song – Greater
Prayer – Nathan

Feature – You Got a Friend in Me
Drama – What Are Friends For?

Wow, what a tough situation.

What would you have done if Sue was your friend? More importantly, what *have* you done in your family and your friendships and your business relationships and your marriage when hard things needed to be said and heard, but you kind of knew in advance it would turn out like

that – painfully?

For many of us, it's easier to keep smiling and pretending everything is OK, so we say nothing. But deep down inside, we're not really happy about the situation and, eventually, the truth comes out. And when it does, it's often painful. Even if we handle it well (as Sue's friend did), we feel terrible and *they* feel terrible.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could keep it from ever getting to that point? Wouldn't it be nice if, in our relationships with family, friends, colleagues and spouses, we never got to the point where there was so much relational dynamite buried that we had to experience a blow up like that one?

That's probably too lofty of a goal given the sinful nature of people in general. But what if we

could at least *minimize the tension* that often builds up behind the scenes in relationships?

That's what I want to talk to you about today as we continue in our series *Playground: Simple Rules for Getting Along With Others*.

A Brief Review

And the idea of this series is that some of the very basic rules of playground etiquette work very well not just for kids who are playing together on the teeter-totter but also for grownups who are doing life together at home, school, work and even church.

To this point we've looked at three of those rules (in the first three messages of this series):

- Adult Supervision Required

- No Littering
- Play at Your Own Risk

In that first message, *Adult Supervision Required*, we discovered that, just as 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 greatly influenced by our relationship with the Ultimate Adult – the God of the Universe who has revealed Himself in Jesus of Nazareth.

And I explained in that message why that's true and how we can go about developing our friendship with God.

In the second message, *No Littering*, Shannon reminded us that the one constant in all of our relationships is us. That means, if we're going to

be successful on the relational playground, need keep the trash we're bringing with us from messing up our relationships. And we're all bringing something because all of us are broken in some way. All of us carry weaknesses, wounds and waste.

And Shannon explained in that message how those things can impact our relationships and how we can deal with them.

And then last week, in the message *Play at Your Own Risk*, we learned that to truly enter into and find joy in our relationships, we've got to believe the best about people in spite of the fact that everyone we know is a fallen sinner – just like we are – and capable of truly hurting us. And we learned that the key to doing that is, as the Apostle Paul once put it, to “make allowances for each other's faults” – to accept people “as is” –

and to love people ... just as God accepts and loves us “as is” through what Jesus did for us on the cross.

Now, before we talk about the fourth rule, I should tell you that there is a method to my madness. I’ve started with these three rules intentionally because they are foundational (and even prerequisite) to the rule we’re going to look at today ... as well as to the rules we’ll look at in the two weeks that follow.

In other words (and more specifically), our ability to experience quality relationships with people (whether those people are easy to get along with or not) ...

... is directly linked to ...

- How we perceive God and experience His truth and grace.
- How we perceive ourselves and deal with our internal garbage.
- And how we perceive people in general – do we believe the best and consistently engage with hopefulness and a positive attitude?

God, self and others: the more we have the right view of that little “trinity” (so to speak), the more we’ll be able to grow and develop in how we actually treat people.

So, as I always say, if you missed one of those messages, it would be worth it to go back and watch, listen or read on our website or our church app.

More importantly, before we get into today's rule, I want to pray for us in these three areas and then we'll continue.

<Prayer>

- How we perceive God and experience His truth and grace.
- How we perceive ourselves and deal with our internal garbage.
- And how we perceive people in general – do we believe the best and consistently engage with hopefulness and a positive attitude?

Amen.

The “Rule” Explained

Today's playground rule is “Use Equipment

Properly.” (picture)

That’s a rule intended primarily for safety. If you use the equipment in a way it wasn’t designed to be used, you might hurt yourself and others.

But it’s also a rule intended for the maintenance and longevity of the playground itself because *if you use the equipment improperly*, you’ll put unhealthy stress and strain on it. And if that tension continues, the equipment *will wear out prematurely and maybe even break*.

Same thing can happen in relationships.

Continued tension will wear on relationships and eventually lead to breakdown (like we saw in the drama). So we need to minimize it before it builds up to unhealthy levels.

That’s the rule.

And, as a pastor (and as a husband, father, son, brother, employee, boss, and friend), I've seen the reality of this rule over and over again. If you allow tension to go unaddressed in relationships, if you allow it to build up to unhealthy levels, those relationships are going to wear down and eventually break down.

Of course, what's much more important than what I've seen or what I think is what the scripture says. So let's take a look and let's begin with the passage we read last week from Colossians 3. But this time, let's take it a little further.

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)

Again, that's a reminder that God is the source of this whole thing. He makes us holy (acceptable and pure in His sight) through what Jesus did and our faith in him. Because of that, Paul is saying, we *can* clothe ourselves in mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience towards others.

Then he continues ...

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)

That's the part we looked at last week.

Now, here's what Paul writes next:

And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts.

Again, back to the relationship we have with God ... which is one of peace and not conflict because of, again, what Jesus did for us on the cross. And, then, the “therefore” of that reality ...

For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. Colossians 3:15 (NLT)

What Paul is saying here is that the peace we have with God ought to work itself out in peace with others ... which is the same principle we see over and over again.

- Blessed-by-God people bless.

- Loved-by-God people love.
- And people with whom God has made peace in Christ because of that experience now have the ability (and responsibility) to live in peace with others.

And it's hard to overstate how significant that idea – that experience – of peaceful relationships is when it comes to what God desires for his children. It matters greatly ... which is why it shows up again and again the writings of Paul.

Live peacefully with each other.
1 Thessalonians 5:13 (NLT)

*Do all that you can to live in peace
with everyone.* *Romans*
12:18 (NLT)

*Pursue what makes for peace and
for building up one another.*
Romans 14:19 (NET)

And it shows up not just in Paul's thoughts but in the thoughts of the other apostles and Jesus himself.

God blesses those who work for peace ... Matthew 5:9 (NLT)

... seek peace and pursue it ... 1 Peter 3:11b (NLT)

Work at living in peace with everyone. Hebrews 12:14 (NLT)

Now, here's a question to think about: how do you seek relational peace and pursue it? What does it look like to work at living in peace? To do all that you can to bring that about?

Actually that's three questions ... but I think it depends on the condition of the relationship. If

it's really bad and in the tank – if it's already worn down and broken – that requires one set of strategies (and we'll be talking about those in the next two messages).

But, if the relationship *hasn't* reached that point, then seeking peace, pursuing peace, working at peace means, at the very least, trying to minimize tensions in the relationship before they build up and produce problems.

Minimizing Relational Tension

So, how do you do that? How do we keep tension to a minimum with the people in our lives?

If we had the time I'm sure we could come up with a list of many things that would be helpful in that endeavor but, in the time that remains, I want to focus in on four strategies that we have

learned here at North Heartland over the years. As I've mentioned several times in this series, for some reason (in a way I never anticipated) God has created in us a passion for this issue. We actually have a special term for it. We call it "relational integrity."

Well, what is that?

"Integrity" comes from the word "integrated" which means that what you are on the outside is the same as what you are on the inside. You're integrated. You're the same all the way through.

So, *relational integrity* means that when you *act* like you're at peace and without tension with someone *externally*, it really is true *internally*. It means you don't settle for the kind of pretense and superficiality that apparently had been going on for some time in the relationship

between Sue and her friend. It means you actually *do what's necessary* to maintain the peace (which is what we're talking about today) or to restore it (which we'll be talking about in the final two messages).

Anyway ... as I said ... I want to share four strategies we have discovered which, quite frankly, have become near and dear to our hearts *for the simple reason that they work*. And if you've been around NHCC for a while you've heard us talk about these *for the simple reason that they work*. These four strategies really do minimize tensions in relationships before they build up and produce problems.

1. Keep a short “left-hand column.”

This is a tool our pastoral staff discovered many years ago. It was created by Chris Argyris (Ar-

guy-rus), a professor at Harvard and has been referenced in many business-oriented publications, including Peter Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline*.

Here's how it works ...

First, you take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle and you label the columns as you see on the screen. Then you think back to some of conversations you've had with someone and write out what you remember of the dialogue on the right hand side of the page.

What I <i>didn't</i> say	What was said

Then, on the left hand side - in the left-hand column - you write what you were thinking and feeling but *not* saying at each stage in

the exchange.

If the relationship is healthy, there's nothing or nothing of importance in that column. Maybe you didn't like their cologne that day but you didn't say it because it's really not an issue.

On the other hand, there could be lots of negative stuff in that column that never comes out of your mouth even though the right-hand column is filled with lots of congenial dialogue.

For example, in our drama, it's pretty obvious that Sue's friend had been thinking and feeling many negative things about Sue's behavior for a pretty long time but never saying anything about it. She was filling up the left-hand column while still being "nice" in the right-hand column ... which means that ... in every interaction there were actually *two* conversations going on – one

that was spoken and one that was unspoken; one that maintained a façade of peace-that's-not-really-peace and one that, had it been verbalized, would have revealed a relationship that was worn or already broken.

I think you can see that this is a very valuable tool for gauging the level of relational integrity with the people around you. The less in your left-hand column, the higher the relational integrity ... and vice-versa.

Now, as I'm sure you've gathered, this kind of analysis takes a lot of time and effort and you almost need to be thinking ahead: "you know, I'm going to have a conversation with her, so I'm going to need to be ready after the interaction to sit down and write it out and do this analysis."

So, let me give you a shortcut if you don't want

to go through all that. Here's how you can figure out what's in your LHC with any given person. Ask yourself this question:

“What am I constantly feeling or thinking that I *want* to say, maybe even *need* to say, but I am *hesitant* to say because I'm afraid of the reaction it might cause?”

If you can list out those statements and analyze them, you will have named the issues that are stressing and straining your relationship. And obviously, if there are a lot of them, you have a lot of work to do and we'll talk about how to go about that next week.

But the point for *this week* is that in order to minimize tension you have to keep this column short. You have to keep stuff from building up by addressing issues sooner rather than later.

Of course, someone could say, “wait a minute, Rick. This sounds like a nice theory but what about the price you pay for constantly bringing the left-hand column and all it represents into the light? That could really raise the tension level, especially if the person is sensitive and fragile, or if they don’t take it well and strike back at you.” (Like what happened in the drama).

That’s a good point ... but my contention is that the cost of not dealing with the junk is even higher, because it means that we have to continue to stuff down anger and frustration instead of dealing with it. And that, according to the scripture, is a prescription for personal disaster.

Chapter four of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians tells us why.

Here's how it reads in The Message translation:

No more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth.

Stop pretending that everything is OK when it isn't.

In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself. Ephesians 4:25 [Msg]

Instead, Paul says ...

Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry - but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry. Don't give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life.

Ephesians 4:26-27 (Msg)

When we do not address tension when it first arises and instead allow it to hide in the left-hand column, we violate every instruction in that verse and we put ourselves into the danger zone.

- We *stay* angry because the frustration is always there, in the LHC.
- We go to bed angry because we're tossing and turning over all the stuff in the LHC.
- Eventually, that stuff becomes fuel for revenge and all of it, Paul says, works together to give the devil a foothold in our lives ... which basically means that it will even start to interfere with our ability to relate to God, not just the people around us.

Bottom line, we have to keep a short left-hand column not just for the good of our relationships, but for the good of our own soul.

Ok, here's the second strategy:

2. Stay off “the ladder of inference.”

This tool is also presented in “The Fifth Discipline” book. I think you’ll see that the concept itself really isn’t all that complex but it can be very helpful in minimizing relational tension.

Here’s how it works.

Imagine a ladder like the one pictured on the screen.

I take action based on
my assumptions



I make assumptions
about the reason for
your behavior

I observe
your behavior

At the bottom rung, I simply observe your behavior. Let's say for example, I notice that you're not smiling and you haven't said anything to me all day.

Now, I have a choice at this point. I can ask, "what's up?" or I can take a step up into the middle rungs where I believe that I somehow have divine insight into your thinking and I infer the motive behind your behavior. I make the assumption that you're not smiling and you haven't said anything because you're mad at me.

At that point, I have another choice. I can say to

you “maybe I’m a little paranoid, but are you mad at me about something?” Or ... I can take another step up and choose a course of action based on my assumptions. I might lash out, I might ignore you, I might tell everyone else what a grouch you are. I could do just about anything at that point.

Now, notice that the higher we get on the ladder, the more tension we add to the relationship. Every step up puts more stress and strain on it. The scary part is that once we start making those assumptions and living in the middle part of the ladder, *all of our responses* to the other person filter through those assumptions.

In time, we don’t even bother to observe the person’s behavior. We just cycle between assumptions about the person’s behavior and our responses based on those assumptions.

And that is a prescription for relational disaster. So, it's wise to stay off the ladder of inference. Instead of climbing we need to seek clarity.

OK, here's the third strategy and it's somewhat related to the second.

3. Don't play the "guessing game."

Where the ladder of inference assumes that somehow *I* know *your* motives, the guessing game assumes that "you know what *I* am thinking" without me ever telling you.

And in the guessing game, not only do I expect you to have divine insight, I expect you to respond accordingly.

I can tell you sad story after sad story of people who've destroyed relationships because they were always playing the guessing game. I can even tell you stories of people who used to go to this church but don't anymore because they played the guessing game with *me*.

I did something that they didn't quite understand so they started climbing the ladder of inference:

- “Rick wasn't very nice to me.” Step.
- “I wonder if he just doesn't like me.” Step.
- “Yeah, I'm pretty sure he doesn't like me.” Step.

And they kept climbing and climbing and pretty soon they reached the top rung and they made a decision. “Since that jerk doesn't like me, I'm just not going to that church anymore.”

Of course, they didn't tell me that's what they were doing. Instead, they switched to the guessing game.

“Well, if he was a good pastor, he would *know* that I'm upset. If he was a good pastor he would call me.”

But I was in the dark about the whole thing, until it was too late to do any good. By then, the relationship was over.

Do you know what the Bible says about the guessing game?

It says ...

No one can know what anyone else is really thinking except that person alone.

1 Corinthians 2:11a (NLT)

Seems like that ought to be common sense, doesn't it? But, it's not. I guess that's why God had to put it in the Bible for us.

When we play the guessing game with people, tension inevitably builds in our relationships. That's why we need a better strategy ... which is to *express* our thoughts and feelings instead of *expecting* others to simply "know." We need to bring into the light what's going on in our heads and because we believe the best about people, give them the chance to respond.

OK, one more strategy that kind of ties back into the first three because it gives us a way to actually implement those strategies.

The Bible tells us that ...

*A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but harsh words stir up anger.
Proverbs 15:1 (NLT)*

In other words, our words can serve to decrease tension or increase tension. And because being rude or profane or mean is probably not going to decrease tension, it would be a good strategy to eliminate that kind of speech altogether.

But that's not the strategy that I'm talking about here. The strategy I'm talking about is to ...

4. Develop and use “specialized language” that facilitates tension-minimizing strategies.

And I'll explain what I mean by that but, first, I have to tell you that when we discovered this

years ago I was amazed at how simple and powerful this idea was. In fact, it was revolutionary for us. Once everyone gets on the same page about the language, it always points us in the direction of the tension-minimizing strategy.

Let me give you some examples and you'll see what I mean.

For instance, instead of playing the guessing game (which increases tension), remember we said the goal is to *express* our thoughts and feelings instead of *expecting* others to simply "know."

But sometimes the problem with that is that what we need to express is not easy to express. For example, sometimes it's hard to say "I'm really hurt by what you did (or didn't) do"

because we feel embarrassed to admit we're hurt by something that maybe wasn't a big deal.

Or maybe we want to do something but we're afraid to say it because people might think we're stupid or silly and so we get mad because they don't read our minds and know that's what we want.

In both of those situations a very simple statement that will keep tension to a minimum is ...

“Can you give me an umbrella of grace?”

I've got something I want to express that might seem goofy or trivial and I'm a little worried about how you will react so before I say it, I would really like you to commit in advance to just be gracious to me ... to bear with my faults

(as the Bible puts it).

Now, obviously the person can say “no, I’m fresh out of umbrellas” or they could say “yes” and then renege which would not be very fun but the more you use this phrase the more you’re communicating “I really do want to express myself instead of expecting you to read my mind. But I need your help.”

And the more you do that, the more you move towards peace in your relationship.

Now, let’s talk about the Ladder of Inference. Remember, the goal is to stay off of it. We don’t want to climb, we want to clarify. And a great clarifying question is (and this is so simple)...

**“Can you please help me understand
_____ <fill in the blank with what your
observation is about their behavior>”**

“Could you please help me understand why you didn’t change the baby’s diaper? Could you please help me understand why you did this particular thing? Could you please help me understand <whatever>?”

It’s a great way to clarify because it allows us to state our observations and our concern over what we’ve observed but it also prevents us from assigning a sinister motive to the person – which, as you would expect, increases tension. This approach is very non-threatening but it’s also very direct. Either the person answers it directly or beats around the bush. And then you know how you should proceed.

Ok, let's talk about left-hand columns – the stuff that we constantly feel or think that we want to say, maybe even need to say, but are hesitant to say because we're afraid of the reaction it might cause.

If everyone is in on the strategy and has agreed that clear left-hand columns are the goal, then this statement works very well:

“My left-hand column is starting to fill up, and I think you need to know about it.”

Very direct.

Of course, that causes tension but it does prepare the person in advance for what's coming.

Now, if people aren't in the strategy, there are still statements that work.

Here's a very simple one: Just ask ... "Are we OK with each other?"

People don't always agree on things and sometimes it gets a little heated when we express our opinions, and that's OK as long as it doesn't wind up in somebody's left-hand column. So, if you suspect that might be the case, go to the other person and invite them to clear it out if necessary.

"Are we OK with each other?"

"Well, not exactly. When you said this, this and this ... I felt <whatever>" ... and the left-hand column begins to clear.

Here's another one to use when you feel your own LHC growing:

"Can I push back on that?"

Somebody is talking to you and pushing your buttons and you need to respond, but you don't want to be a jerk. You say, "I'm starting to feel tension about this. Can I push back on you for a minute?" It helps you get the junk out.

Here's another one: "Is there an elephant in the room?"

This is a good one to use when you begin to wonder if an entire group of people is trying to ignore underlying tension that needs to be dealt with.

One more ... for the really tough things that need to be said ... "Can I go the last 10% with you?"

When you're clearing the left-hand column, it's usually easy to dump the first 90%, especially if your relational culture encourages it. But the last

10% - the really scary stuff – is still hard to say and hard to hear. You need a way to get into it and this statement does it.

It prepares the other person for what you're going to say, and gives them the option to decide, "I really *don't* want to hear this right now" while letting them know that there's still an issue to be dealt with.

Developing a specialized language like this might feel a little mechanical or rehearsed at first. But eventually that goes away as you get the hang of it and you see, as we have, the great value in it.

Conclusion

Well, that about does it for this message so ... a question as we close: *What strategies are you employing to minimize tension in your relationships*

before it reaches unhealthy levels?

Let me pray for you in that.

Prayer:

- Keep a short “left-hand column.”
- Stay off the “ladder of inference.”
- Don’t play the “guessing game.”
- Develop and use “specialized language” that facilitates tension-minimizing strategies.

Amen.

Next week’s rule ... no pushing or shoving ... what to do when you can’t make peace.

Let me ask you to give your attention to the video screen for some announcements and then,

after that, we're going to sing a closing song together and receive our offering.

Video Announcements

**Worship Song – Finding Who We Are / Offering
Dismissal - Nathan**

Endnotes