

Playground
Playground Closes at Dark
November 15, 2015

PRELUDE – We Are
Worship Song – We Are

Baptism Intro – Rick

Feature – Redeemed

Baptism (w/All Because of Jesus) – Ladell/Rick

Announcements – Shannon

Feature – Losing / Offering

Remember when you were a kid and it was summertime and you were outside playing with your friends ... and you'd lose track of time because you were having so much fun ... and it seemed like the day was never going to end because, well, that's how it is in summertime.

But as the sun finally began to set in the west

and the crickets began their nightly serenade, you'd hear your mom or your dad calling: "It's getting dark out. Time to come home."

And you'd say, "Aw man, do I have to? Johnny's mom isn't making him come home."

But you *did* ... *have to* ... because otherwise, you'd get in trouble ... but also because you really can't play all that well once it gets dark outside ...

... which is why almost every playground has a rule: "Playground closes at dark."

The games are over until conditions improve – when it becomes light again.

And that's the final rule that we're looking at in this series *Playground: Simple Rules for Getting Along with Others*.

A Brief Review

And I suppose that, since this is the final rule and final message, it might be worth doing a quick review of the rules that came before this one so we can see the progression.

The first three rules we looked at in this series formed the foundation.

- *Adult Supervision Required:* 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 is greatly influenced by our relationship with the God of the Universe who has revealed Himself in Jesus of Nazareth.
- *No Littering:* if we're going to be successful on the relational playground, we 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.

- *Play at Your Own Risk:* in order to find joy in our relationships, we've got to believe the best about people and consistently engage with hopefulness and a positive attitude in spite of the fact that everyone is a fallen sinner – just like we are.

And we saw that these three rules were foundational because the more accurate our view of God, self and others, the more likely we grow and develop in how we actually relate to people ...

... which is what the other three rules are about.

- *Use Equipment Properly:* Because continual tension wears on relationships and eventually leads to breakdowns, we need to minimize it before it builds up to

unhealthy levels. And we do that by proactively implementing strategies that maintain relational peace and harmony.

- And then, last week's rule ... *No Pushing or Shoving*: Even when we strive to maintain peace and harmony, there will always be misunderstandings and hurt feelings on the playground. But those offenses can be handled in ways that are not damaging or dangerous. Even though you can't avoid conflict, you can avoid *destructive* conflict. And we talked about how to do that.

And, by the way, if you missed any of these messages, you can watch, listen to or read them online at our website or on the Discover tab of our app.

The Rule Explained

Now, today's rule, *Playground Closes at Dark*, is about those times when conflict *has* become destructive; those times when, in spite of our best efforts to maintain peace and our best efforts to handle offenses appropriately, it becomes impossible to continue relating as we were because there's just too much pain and too much injury. Sometimes the relational playground has to close down because of darkness. And "play" (so to speak) can't resume until (and unless) something dramatic happens and conditions improve, i.e. when it becomes light again.

And that's the rule.

Sometimes, you can't – and shouldn't – continue with the relational status quo unless and until something drastic happens to improve things.

Well, you actually *can* continue if you're a really good pretender or if you're co-dependent, i.e. if you need someone to treat

you in an abusive manner in order to have a sense of purpose in your life.

But, for the sake of today's message, I'm going to assume that no one here is co-dependent. And I'm going to assume that we're all interested in *relational integrity* – where what goes on in our interactions *externally* matches up with the thoughts and feelings we have *internally*.

And given those assumptions ... the rule is: sometimes, you can't – and shouldn't – continue with the relational status quo unless and until something drastic happens.

And I think that sounds pretty logical ... but it also kind of goes against what most people think Christianity teaches.

- After all, didn't Jesus say not to judge other people?

- Didn't He say Christians are supposed to love their enemies?
- Aren't we supposed to lose our life in order to find it?

I mean, the idea that sometimes, you can't – and shouldn't – continue the relational status quo unless and until conditions improve doesn't sound very biblical – at least, not on the surface of it.

So, let's go a little deeper than the surface. And let's look at something else Jesus had to say that is just as important when it comes to dealing with people and relationships.

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves,” Jesus said. “Therefore be as shrewd as serpents and as innocent as doves.”
Matthew
10:16 (NIV)

And then He went on to talk about some of the

not-so-nice things that people will sometimes do to us.

This is one of the things I love about Jesus. He doesn't sugarcoat things. Instead, He acknowledges the reality of the world we live in; specifically, that ...

- Sometimes we have to deal with people who are not pleasant;
- Sometimes we have to deal with people who are not good;
- And sometimes we have to deal with people who are evil and therefore *dangerous*.

And in those situations, Jesus tells us, it will require a combination of innocence and shrewdness on our part.

- “Innocence” in that we *do* believe the best about people; that we *do* work to

maintain relational peace; and that *do* we try to deal with conflict constructively and redemptively.

- “Shrewdness” in that we are wise in how we handle situations where it’s “gotten dark” relationally; where relationships have broken down and maybe even have become destructive and dangerous.

Drastic Measures

And we’ll talk about being wise and shrewd in just a bit but, first, I’m sure you’re wondering what kinds of drastic things I’m talking about that can improve relationships, so let me just give them to you right up front. Four drastic measures that can bring the light back in the right circumstances are *forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration and repentance* ... forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration and repentance.

Now, over the years as I've worked with people who are trying to resolve relational conflicts and difficulties, I've noticed that a lot of us use those words interchangeably, as if they all had the same general meaning when, in reality, they do not. And the result of that confusion is unrealistic expectations of how damaged relationships heal, which then produces even more hurt and pain.

So, I think it would be good to take a little bit of time defining what each word means. And let's start with the definition of forgiveness. And this is fairly complex because, as you'll see, *forgiveness is complex* – and it's the key to everything else that follows.

1. Forgiveness is *mercifully* choosing (and re-choosing) not to punish or demand from someone what they owe us for their offenses; *graciously* choosing (and re-choosing) to free someone from the obligation to undo the damage that they have done through those offenses. (Repeat)

Ok, let's point out a few things about this definition. First of all, I think you see that forgiveness is dependent on the qualities of mercy and grace which, unfortunately, are also typically understood to be interchangeable but they're not.

- “Mercy” means that I don't give you the bad things you have earned and rightfully deserve because of your bad behavior. I don't hurt you, even though I would be justified to do so. That's mercy.
- “Grace” means I give you good things – like freedom from guilt and obligation – that you cannot earn and you do not deserve. I treat you better than you deserve. That's grace.

And those two qualities are the foundations of forgiveness.

But in order to be gracious and merciful to you; in order to offer forgiveness to you – and this is very important to understand – I have to do something with the offense you have committed. I can't just look the other way and pretend it doesn't exist. Justice demands that you ought to suffer equally to make up for what I've suffered – “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” kind of thing.

So, if I'm going to forgive you – if I'm not going to extract from you what you owe me and instead give you the freedom that you don't deserve – I have to reckon or consider what I have suffered at your hands to be the suffering you deserve to suffer for your sin against me. In essence, I myself have to become your substitute. Through my suffering I “pay the penalty” for you which means that you don't have to.

(And, if you've been around church for very

long, I'm sure you'll recognize that this is the exact same way that Jesus offers forgiveness to all of us. His death and suffering on the cross is "reckoned" as ours. A lot of people think that the Cross is some kind of a weird and even abusive spiritual transaction, but it's not. It's exactly how forgiveness works every day in the human dimension, although obviously the cross exceeds that dimension).

Anyway ... that's what the transaction of forgiveness looks like at the core.

But that's *just* the core. There's more to it than that ... and this is the thing about forgiveness that's really difficult and that a lot of us miss: quite often, *forgiveness is not a one-and-done kind of deal*. Forgiveness – at least of the human variety – very rarely sticks with a one-time pronouncement.

To forgive someone for an offense means *repeatedly* choosing to give mercy and grace

every time it occurs to us “wow, they really did me wrong – and it still hurts.” It means that whenever the hurt reappears – something is said, we see something that reminds us, whatever happens – to forgive means that whenever that hurt reappears, we choose again to pay the penalty within ourselves instead of requiring payment from the offender. And we do it without making a big deal about it – “I’m having to suffer so much because I am forgiving you!”

By the way, this re-choosing idea explains a very curious conversation that once took place between Jesus and the Apostle Peter.

The Bible says that ...

*Peter came to him and asked,
“Lord, how often should I
forgive someone who sins
against me? Seven times?”*

“No, not seven times,” Jesus

*replied, "but seventy times seven!" Matthew 18:21-22
(NLT)*

And the point Jesus was making is clear. "Peter, your forgiveness needs to be without limit (as God's forgiveness is without limit)."

What isn't clear is whether Jesus was talking about forgiving 490 different offenses, or 490 consecutive occurrences of the same offense. Maybe He was saying that sometimes you have to forgive one offense 490 times. Maybe forgiving one offense is a process that you never give up on; a series of decisions that you make over and over – without limit.

Ok, that's forgiveness. And I think you can see from the definition that it is a drastic and dramatic action to take because it wipes the offender's slate clean.

Now, the other three words are much simpler to define, especially when you realize that they are not equivalent to forgiveness.

2. Reconciliation is the ability of formerly-estranged parties to occupy the same physical or emotional space (e.g. the grocery store aisle, a family holiday gathering, a soccer game) without fear or hostility and with mutual respect and goodwill.

Reconciliation means that if they somehow wind up in the same place, the offender doesn't fear that they're going to be hit over the head with reminders of how bad they sinned. It means that the one who has been hurt doesn't fear that the offender will intentionally hurt them again. The two parties now view each other as people and not objects. They can get along with each other and they feel OK about engaging with each other on an occasional and limited basis.

I think you can see that reconciliation is not the

same as forgiveness. It's a step beyond. And I think you can see that it's a pretty drastic and dramatic action to take.

OK, let's look at restoration.

3. *Restoration* is the full or partial re-establishment of relationship as trust is rebuilt over time.

If reconciliation is the state of being back at ground zero with someone – hostilities have ceased, respect has returned, we're OK with being in the same physical or emotional space – then restoration is the state of resuming *at some level* the relationship that previously existed. And that level, whatever it is, is dependent on how much trust has been restored.

Now, I think you can see from these definitions that these relational states *are sequential in nature*. In other words, you can't have

restoration without first having reconciliation and you can't have reconciliation without first offering and receiving forgiveness (and having it being offered and re-offered as often as necessary).

And, just to be clear, depending on the nature of the offense and how much trust must be rebuilt, that sequence might take only 30 seconds and it might be totally one-sided. "You know what? What you just said hurt me, but I forgive you. And I'm OK with you – I don't feel any hostility or fear. So, let's fully resume our relationship."

It might take 30 seconds. Or, it might take 30 days or 30 weeks or even 30 months to go from forgiveness to reconciliation to restoration. *It depends on the nature of the offense and how long it takes to rebuild trust.*

Actually, sometimes it depends on more than that. Sometimes, it also depends on the

repentance of the offender ... which is the final term we need to define.

4. *Repentance* is changing our mind about our behavior – specifically, agreeing with the offended party that we have behaved in a way that *requires* their *forgiveness* and desiring to change.

Repentance is not “if I offended you in some way, then I apologize” (which is one of the most worthless and insincere set of words that can ever be strung together in a sentence.) And it’s not even a more sincere, “wow, I’m really, really sorry.”

Instead of sugarcoating or minimizing or self-justifying behavior that’s offensive and hurtful, repentance says, “I did wrong. My behavior was unacceptable. I don’t want to be that kind of person. And I am at your mercy and in need of your grace.”

And, again, I think you can see how repentance

is a pretty drastic measure that can bring the light back into a relationship.

OK, now that we have these definitions, let's clarify one more thing that sometimes gets a little fuzzy in this.

Almost every week in this series we have read this passage:

Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Colossians 3:13 (NLT)

When Paul wrote that, he was actually echoing what Jesus himself said on several occasions: that those of us who are His followers are to forgive as we ourselves have been forgiven.

But what Jesus *didn't* say is that we *have to be*

reconciled or restored in relationships. He told us to work towards it whenever possible, but He didn't present it with the same imperative. Why not?

Because reconciliation and restoration depend on the repentance of the *offender* while forgiveness depends only the decision of the *offended*.

See, as Christians, we are obligated to *forgive* people in the same way that Jesus has forgiven us. We are to “pay (and continue to pay) the penalty” – to allow what we have suffered to “cover” what they owe. We don't pretend that nothing happened, but we don't also seek to harm them (by, for example, gossiping or talking the person down to other people). Instead, we treat them better than they deserve.

However, we are not obligated to even consider *reconciliation* until there is *repentance* on the offender's part. In fact, it

would be foolish to “enter without fear” into the same emotional or physical space with person who has not changed their mind concerning behaviors that hurt us and is not also taking steps to change those behaviors. In addition, it would also be misleading and wrong to accord an unrepentant person our full respect and goodwill.

Finally, we are not obligated to consider *restoration* of an ongoing relationship with an offender (at any level) until enough positive behavioral change over time has allowed sufficient trust to accumulate. Even then, we are still not obligated to restore the relationship (at any level) if we feel that that person’s presence would be detrimental to our family or our own personal well-being.

You see, the full restoration of a relationship is a two-sided coin and we can only be responsible for our side. We *must* forgive as Christ forgives, even if the offender doesn’t

repent. But anything beyond that ... requires the action of both people.

Shrewd Strategies

OK, now ... with all of *that* as background ... let's look at some biblical strategies for wisely and shrewdly applying those drastic measures in various situations with various kinds of people.

And to do so, I think it's helpful to think in terms of a spectrum ...

Where on one end, there are people who are only mildly difficult to relate to. At the other end are people who are impossible and maybe even unsafe to relate to. And then of course, there are a whole bunch of people in the middle.

So, for purposes of discussion, let's divide the line into thirds ...

... and talk about what strategies might be applied to people in each of these “zones” so to speak.

On the mildly-difficult end you’ve got what I would call ...

Zone 1: The “Ordinary Sinner” zone – made up of people who take advantage of us in the “normal” ways that people take advantage of one another.

That sounds a little funny to say that but, because this is not a perfect world in which we live, everyone – even “good people” – takes advantage of others in ways that are often painful, but not destructive.

Jesus once talked about dealing with these kinds of people. Matthew 5:38 tells us that he said ...

"You have heard that it was

said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'

... which is one way of dealing with people like this.

But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. Matthew 5:38-43 (NIV)

... and who will probably not return it to you.

Jesus is saying, I think, “you have a choice in how you deal with these people who come in and out of your life who take advantage of you

in ways that ordinary sinners take advantage of each other. You can play the scorekeeping game. You can keep records of ‘you did this to me, so I have the right to do this back to you.’ Your goal can be to keep everything even. Or, you can do it a different way. ”

You can adopt a strategy like this: You can give up the right to revenge and bear the load willingly.

In other words, take the offense onto yourself – you pay the penalty yourself ... which, as we’ve seen already, is what we mean by “forgiving.” For the people in our Zone One, the main strategy is going to revolve around simple forgiveness.

Ok, let’s move to the next zone ...

Zone 2: The zone of the “Hardened Heart” – made up of people who stubbornly refuse to repent of their wrongdoing towards us.

To deal with these folks, we need to go back to the passage that we looked at last week from Matthew 18 where Jesus says:

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.

This is a situation where's it's gone beyond just those normal kinds of offenses that you can take into yourself on a day-to-day basis, where you just forgive. In this zone, you've got to go beyond that because these are things that are intentionally done to hurt you. They're beyond the normal pain of everyday interactions.

Jesus says, "go to him (or her) and ...

If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen (he says, 'I don't want to listen to this. I don't think I've done anything

wrong. I have nothing to repent of') ... *take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'*

Take along some other people who can verify what you are saying: "this is what we see, too. You've got to stop acting this way towards this person."

If he refuses to listen to them (if he continues to say, 'I still don't see that I'm doing anything wrong and have nothing to repent of'), tell it to the church;

He's describing a community of faith here obviously, but I think it works the same way in the world – you go to the authorities and you get them involved. And Jesus says ...

... and if he refuses to listen

even to the church (even to the highest authority) ...

In other words, if this person's heart is really hard and he's just not going to repent no matter what, then Jesus says,

*... treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”
Matthew 18:15-17 (NIV)*

What does that mean?

You might think that, because things are kind of escalating here in this sequence Jesus is describing, that he is saying, “Okay, now you’ve determined that this person is the absolute worst and so you just cut them off and have nothing more to do with them. Get rid of them and let them go.”

But he's not. Remember how Jesus treated pagans and tax collectors? The scripture reveals two things.

- First of all, he kept them at a little bit of distance. He really did. He didn't allow them to become part of the inner circle surrounding Him.
- But at the same time, he loved them. He welcomed them. He desired that they would repent towards God *so that they could* become part of the inner circle.

And I think that's the strategy for those of us who have to deal with people who have hardened hearts.

Strategy: Create protective boundaries, but keep open the door to reconciliation and restoration.

Create protective boundaries – say, “Look, if you're not going to repent of this wrongdoing even after we've gone through all this, even though we've gone up the chain of command (if that's what you want to call it), then I cannot

have a close personal relationship with you. I cannot be open to you in that way. There is a protective boundary here” (whatever that boundary is, however you define it).

But then you also say, “Even though there is a boundary in place to protect me from you, the door is still open for the possibility of reconciliation and restoration” ... just as God keeps the door open for pagans and tax collectors who will repent. “If you will repent, we can work on reconciliation and then, maybe even full restoration.”

Ok, that’s zone one and zone two. Let’s talk about the hardest zone of all ...

Zone 3: The zone of “Destructive Intent” – made up of people who, if they could do it, they would ruin us.

They would ruin our reputation, they would ruin our family, whatever they could do to get

us, they would do it.

You might be surprised to know that the scripture actually has much to say about people who are in the zone of destructive intent. Paul is writing in Titus 3:10 about a person in a church who was causing deep division among the membership, and he says ...

*Warn a divisive person once,
and then warn him a second
time. After that, have nothing
to do with him. Titus 3:10
(NIV)*

Sounds kind of harsh doesn't it? What's the deal here?

Well, think about it. What's a divisive person going to do to a church? A divisive person is going to say, "I'm going to get a bunch of people on *my* side, and we're going to organize against the people on *that* side, and then pretty soon we'll have the "Hatfields and the McCoys" thing

going on here. And I'm just going to bring this whole thing down because I just hate it."

That's the danger of a divisive person running loose in a church, and, so, Paul says, "you warn them – you beg with them and plead with them. And you do it twice if necessary. But if they don't respond, if they're still intent on destruction, then you have nothing more to do with them. You end the relationship."

Now, that sounds really cold – but listen closely to what Paul's reasoning is ... which is something he explains in a very specific case in which a specific person *was* causing division in the church in Corinth.

Paul tells that congregation to ...

*Cast this man out of the church,
into Satan's hand ... so that his
sinful nature will be destroyed
and he himself will be saved
when the Lord returns. 1*

Corinthians 5:4-5 (NLT)

There's actually a two-fold purpose in ending the relationship in Paul's mind. It's not just for the protection of the church fellowship, it's also for the man's own good.

So, put that all together and the strategy is

...

- Grieve (“what must be going on in the life of this person so set on destroying me that they would act this way? What a waste of the creation that God has made them to be.”)
- Warn (“you cannot keep behaving this way – destroying yourself and me at the same time. You just can't do it. I'm drawing a line.”)
- Then, as Paul laid it out, leave them to the consequences of their sin. (“OK, if that's

how you want it, then that's how it will be and you will suffer the consequences.") *But ... but ...* as Paul said, *you never stop hoping* for their salvation, their restoration.

Remember, "Cast the man out," Paul says, "but do it for his own good that possibly he will be saved."

By the way, if you read Second Corinthians (the letter that came after that, to the Corinthian church from Paul), that's exactly what happened to this guy. The church followed Paul's instructions and the guy repented and Paul told them to restore him to their fellowship.

And sometimes the same thing happens in our relationships.

Conclusion

Well ... those are some biblical strategies for dealing with different kinds of people when the relational playground has to close down because of darkness and you can't – and shouldn't – continue with the relational status quo unless and until something drastic happens.

And I know we just skimmed the surface of what all could be said, so if you're going to deal with the people in your life in each of these zones, you'll probably have to think and pray about it a lot. But, hopefully, all of this has given you a framework in which to do so.

But one more thing needs to be said as we draw this to a close ... and that is that Jesus called us to be more than just shrewd in these kinds of things; remember, He also called us to be innocent, innocent as doves.

So the question is, where does the soft-hearted,

pure-visioned innocence that produces *the ability to offer forgiveness* come from? That's a really important question because everything we've talked about today depends on our ability to be the kind of person who can give grace and mercy to people who do not deserve it. How do we become that kind of person?

Almost every week in this series we have read this passage:

Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Colossians 3:13 (NLT)

It all goes back to our relationship with God and what He has done for us.

- People who have received mercy can show mercy.
- People who have received grace can show

grace.

- People who are forgiven can forgive.

And my hope and prayer for you as we end this series is that God's mercy, grace and forgiveness will be the foundation of your life and of all your relationships.

In fact, would you stand as we close in prayer?

- Ordinary sinners ... give up the right to revenge and bear the load willingly.
- Hardened hearts (people who stubbornly refuse to repent of their wrongdoing towards us) ... Create protective boundaries, but keep open the door to reconciliation and restoration.
- People with "Destructive Intent" – made up of people who, if they could do it, they would ruin us ... grieve, warn, leave but

hope for their salvation.

- Live out of our relationship with you.

Amen,

Closing Comment – Rick

Can you believe that Thanksgiving is less than two weeks away? And Christmas is just over five? It's about to get really crazy for a lot of us which is why next week I'm going to be giving a message called "The Survivor's Guide to the Holidays." It's going to be a great day that you don't want to miss. And I'll see you then!

Endnotes