



Relationships

A MESS WORTH MAKING



Relationships: God's Workshop¹

The following statements are good and show positive areas in a relationship, but can you identify the underlying agenda in these statements?

- “I am so happy we don’t argue like we used to.”
- “I just love being with you.”
- “It’s great to know that I have found someone I can trust.”
- “We have such a great sex life.”
- “Before I met you, I was so lonely.”

A wealthy celebrity has just given a sizable donation to a worthy cause. During an interview he is asked, “What motivated you to make this donation?” At first glance the gift seems to be a generous act of kindness. But the celebrity answers, “When I wake up in the morning, I can look at myself in the mirror and say that I am a good person. And when I go to bed at night, I can feel good about myself.” No doubt the donation will benefit others, but the point is that what looks good on the surface doesn’t always look that way under closer inspection. What we get out of them can “drive” even our most altruistic moments.

Two themes about relationships predominate in Scripture:

1. The power of self-interest is still present in the believer.

While the control of sin is broken, the sin that remains in us still puts up a real fight. We will never escape the power of self-interest in this life, even in our best relationships. In fact, the more satisfying the relationship, the less conscious you will be of self-interest. The most destructive diseases are the ones that don’t show themselves in obvious ways. This is true of spiritual maladies as well.

2. God has a bigger agenda for our relationships than we do.

In all things God has a purpose and design. God’s purpose and design for relationships is to conform us to the image of Christ!

God’s Desire for Our Relationships

We all have a dream for our relationships; and because our dream is often what we want, in the way we want, and at the time we want, it tends to lead to impatience, vengeance, lying, manipulation, envy, competition, disgust, hostility, or anger. Ephesians 4 shows us what God wants our relationships to be.

¹ The following from *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* by Tim Lane and Paul Tripp, available for \$10.00 in the CBC Resource Center.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. (Ephesians 4:1)

Paul urges us to “live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” Our lives should reflect this calling we have received! Specifically, Paul says it should show up in our relationships in the body of Christ. In other words, you can’t take the gospel seriously and not take your relationships seriously.

God’s Workshop: A Call to Unity

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

“Keep the unity of the Spirit.”

Paul says we are to maintain—not create—these relationships. If we are Christians, we automatically are in relationship with other Christians. We are united with other believers because we are united with Christ and share the same Spirit. Therefore, our relationships are gifts to be managed and taken care of. Gossip, slander, anger, and so on, devalues and harms these gifts. If we are willing to pursue, forgive, and serve, we demonstrate care for these gifts. Is there a relationship you struggle to see as a gift? If so, are you willing to ask God to change your heart and perspective?

“Make every effort.”

Hard work can be satisfying. Paul knows that relationships, even among people who have the Spirit, will not be easy. The biblical work ethic for relationships is that it will require work and that the work is worth it when we have God’s glory and praise in mind. Many give up when the relationship requires work or when we place ourselves at the center instead of God’s calling. When we place ourselves as the purpose of relationships, we often decide the dividend yield is not worth the investment.

“Be humble, gentle, patient, and forbearing with one another in love.”

Even before Paul mentions specific actions, he describes four key character qualities that are sometimes the opposite of what drives our relationships.

Humility: This quality enables us to see our own sin before we focus on the sin and weakness of another. Do you hold others to a higher standard than you do yourself?

Gentleness: A gentle person is not weak but someone who uses his strength to empower others. A gentle person can use strength without damaging those he is trying to help. Do people regularly feel bruised in their relationship with you?

Patience: This quality places others' needs higher than or at the same level as our own. We don't come with a self-centered agenda.

Forbearance: A forbearing person is a person who is humble, gentle, and patient even when provoked. Do you love people with limits that are driven by your own perceived needs or interests? Do others feel as if they must always return a favor to keep you happy with them?

Because we have received grace, we are to give grace to others in our relationships. Often, a structure of law, offense, and punishment governs relationships. For example: I have a set of rules you must abide by, I watch to make sure you follow these rules, and I am justified to mete out some form of punishment if you do not. This is a flagrant contradiction of the gospel! God's grace and favor in our lives should reflect his glory and show in our relationships.

"There is one Spirit, one Lord, and one Father."

The basis of our unity is the unity of the Trinity, not our ability to get along. We get along because Father, Spirit, and Son have empowered us to do so.

God's Workshop: An Appreciation of Diversity

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it ... ¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Because it is grounded in the Trinity, our unity also allows us to celebrate our diversity in the body of Christ. There is one God but three persons. God creates and uses our diversity to accomplish his purpose: our growth in grace. Diversity is not an obstacle but quite a significant means to this end.

“But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” ‘

God has created us with different gifts, different capacities for service, and different levels of maturity. All these differences are there by God’s sovereign apportionment. God surrounds us with different people to promote his purpose. Do you tend to get along only with people who are most like you?

“So that the body of Christ may be built up.”

God wants us to mature, to be built up, and to stop acting like infants. He wants the things that ruled Christ’s heart to rule ours as well. Relationships are God’s tool for doing this construction. This is where the true value of relationships runs counter to what we normally think. We think things are going well only if we are getting along with others. But God says that it is also when we are not getting along with others that he is accomplishing his purposes! For example, if you quit at the first sign of fatigue when you exercise, you miss the chance to become more fit. Exercise after exhaustion is the most efficient and productive time for physical fitness. This is true of relationships as well. God has designed our relationships to function as both a diagnosis and a cure. When we are frustrated and ready to give up, God is at work revealing places where we have given in to a selfish agenda.

We enter relationships for personal pleasure, self-actualization, and fun. We want low personal cost and high self-defined returns. But God wants high personal cost and high God-defined returns.

God’s Workshop: Our Struggle and God’s Agenda

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^a 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.

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.

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

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. 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.

Finally, Paul lays out what relationships look like when God's purpose rules. He identifies seven tendencies of the sinful heart that are damaging to relationships, disruptive of God's purpose, and require persistent battling.

The 7 Tendencies of the Sinful Heart

1. The tendency toward self-indulgence (vv. 19–24)

My behavior in the relationship is driven by what I want and not God's purpose.

2. The tendency toward deceit (v. 25)

I will manipulate the truth to get what I want out of the relationship.

3. The tendency toward anger (vv. 26–27)

I want to control the relationship by venting my anger or by holding it over you to control you.

4. The tendency toward selfishness (v. 28)

I want to protect what I have rather than offer it to serve you.

5. The tendency toward unhelpful communication (vv. 29–30)

Rather than use my speech to make you feel better and put you in a better position, I speak to make myself feel better and ensure that I am in the top spot.

6. The tendency toward division (v. 31)

I give in to the temptation to view you as an adversary rather than a companion in the struggle of relationship.

7. The tendency toward an unforgiving spirit (v. 32)

I want to make others pay for their wrongs against me.

We are all tempted by these tendencies. We are not immune even as believers. But when we realize, by God's grace, that relationships demand hard work, we can become willing to enter the struggle rather than avoid it. We see that this is where God is present and active. We begin to run toward others rather than away and can experience the following:

- How much wiser God's plan is for us than our plan for ourselves (vv. 19–24)
- The life-changing power of truthfulness (v. 25)
- The healing benefit of gentleness, patience, and love (vv. 26–27)
- The joy of serving the needs of someone else (v. 28)
- The value of loving and wholesome communication (vv. 29–30)
- The beauty of functional unity in a relationship (v. 31)
- The freedom of practicing forgiveness (v. 32)

Josh was promised a promotion, but it required moving. He and his wife, Sara, began researching the place they would have to move to. It was a nicer climate with better schools, and with the promotion they could easily afford a bigger house. Josh and Sara decided to take the promotion and moved their family of six.

Once they had settled in, they began searching for a good church to join. The first church was small and friendly but had no Sunday school for the children. The second church Sara really liked because its worship was similar to when she was growing up, but Josh did not like it. The third church they visited was big, too big for Sara to ever feel comfortable but Josh loved the worship and the preaching.

After two months of seeking, neither Sara nor Josh could agree on any one new church. Josh was angry with Sara for not being willing to try something new, and Sara was hurt that Josh wouldn't give up trivial needs for the sake of the family. After three months Sara began taking the kids to the closest church while Josh stayed home.

What is Josh's part in the conflict, and what is Sara's part in the conflict? What needs to occur to resolve the issues?