



Relationships

A MESS WORTH MAKING



Relationships: The Problem and the Solution¹

- Have you ever felt misunderstood?
- Have you ever been hurt by what another person said?
- Have you ever felt as if you haven't been heard?
- Have you ever been betrayed?
- Have you ever had to work through a misunderstanding?
- Have you ever disagreed on a decision?
- Have you or the other person ever held a grudge?
- Have you ever experienced loneliness even when things were going well?
- Have you ever been let down?
- Have you ever doubted another person's love?
- Has the other person ever doubted your commitment?
- Have you ever struggled to resolve a conflict?
- Have you ever wished that you didn't have to give or serve?
- Have you ever felt used?
- Have you ever thought, *If I had only known?*

Even in our most satisfying relationship, we can probably answer yes to all of these questions. Even in our most satisfying relationship, there are struggles and temptations, quarrels and conflicts. If we can answer yes to most of these questions for our *best* relationship, how much more work must be required in relationships that are more difficult! Our experiences with relationships help us understand why the Bible includes so many commands and exhortations to be patient, kind, forgiving, compassionate, gentle, and humble. The Bible assumes that relationships this side of eternity will be messy and require a lot of work.

Inside Out, Upside Down

James asks, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?" and answers by reminding us that our real problem is not located outside ourselves (which we can be so easily tempted to blame) but is rather inside us: "Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" (James 4:1). We allow our selfish desires to rule over us instead of God, and this leads to problems, conflicts, and disappointments. This role reversal—making ourselves ultimate and God secondary—the Bible calls sin.

Finish each of these lines with a word or phrase:

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

Sin inside of me is like a _____.

Sin inside of me makes me feel like a _____.

When I think of my sin, I feel _____.

When I think of my sin, I need _____.

I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin. (Romans 7:21-25)

Identify some words or phrases Paul uses to describe his sinful condition.

- The law of sin—*sin is an inescapable principle in our lives that we will never be free from until we are made perfect.*
- War—*sin is a continual inner conflict, battling against God's law.*
- Prisoner—*though we may want to do what is right, often sin pulls us and removes our freedom.*
- Rescue—*our sin requires an outside helper.*
- Body of death—*sin brings death and separation both physically and relationally.*

The Basic Effects of Sin

Kristin and Shane had been friends since grade school. In high school, something more than friendship began to blossom. Although they ended up at different colleges, they remained close and spent at least three weekends a month together.

It wasn't long before they began to talk about marriage. They felt so fortunate to marry someone who had been a friend since childhood! The college years flew by, and soon after graduation, they married. They looked forward to spending the rest of their lives together.

Shane and Kristin found good jobs and purchased a beautiful home in a neighborhood they loved. Their days were busy, but their evenings together were wonderful. They always looked forward to their Saturday brunch at the bohemian café down the street. It seemed as if they were living their dream when, unexpectedly, Kristin was pregnant. This was not part of the plan. She had tried to be careful! What in the world would she tell Shane?

Kristin dreaded seeing Shane and answering the question he was sure to ask. She wanted him to be understanding, maybe even excited, but she knew this was unlikely. That conversation was a turning point in their relationship. Shane was very upset that Kristin “hadn’t been more careful.” Kristin was crushed that Shane would blame the pregnancy on her and treat the baby like a disease. On top of this, Kristin and Shane desperately needed her income, but if she continued to be sick as she had been, she wouldn’t be able to work for long. Shane was discouraged, Kristin was sick, and their finances were growing tighter every day.

Their struggles soon began to erode their relationship. Shane became bitter, frustrated, critical, and demanding. He worked more at the office and seemed to be more occupied at home with office matters too. Kristin pulled away from Shane, giving him space, and spent more time with her girlfriends. Having been raised in a well-managed, financially stable family, Shane was irritated that they had gotten themselves into such a tight spot. Kristin was hurt that her closest friend now seemed like her worst enemy.

Shane and Kristin’s biggest problem is inside them—not the unexpected pregnancy and financial difficulty. If Shane and Kristin see the unexpected circumstance as the root of their problem instead of their own sin, then they will continue to struggle in their relationship.

Sin erodes relationships by affecting us in six basic ways. Let’s identify these eroding influences in Shane and Kristin and then in ourselves.

1. Self-centeredness: Since relationships are about being other-centered, the self-centeredness of sin will inevitably subvert God’s design. When we reject God, we create a void that cannot remain empty. Sin will lead us instinctively to fill it with ourselves.

Can you identify self-centeredness in Kristin and Shane’s relationship?

When things got tough, they immediately defaulted to a what-is-best-for-me? position rather than a what-is-God-doing-in-and-through-us? perspective.

2. Self-rule: When God's wise and loving rule over us is replaced with self-rule, other people become our subjects. They are expected to do our bidding and bow to our control. Because relationships are supposed to be conducted between two people who are equally submitted to God, the quest for self-rule will always wreak havoc.

Can you identify the sin of self-rule in Shane and Kristin's difficulty?

They respond to each other by trying to take control—Shane tries to dominate Kristin with criticism and demands; Kristin tries to control Shane with isolation and silence.

3. Self-sufficiency: When we reject God, we believe the intoxicating but poisonous delusion that we are not dependent. If we don't see that we are dependent upon God, it is unlikely that we will be humbly dependent on others. One of God's principle means of providing for us is through our human relationships.

How have Kristin and Shane moved toward self-sufficiency?

They try to solve the problem on their own; they don't work together in dependency but move toward isolation and independence. They forget that God has not left them alone but has provided each the other to depend upon.

4. Self-righteousness: When the holiness of God is not our personal standard of what is good, true, and right, we will always set ourselves up as that standard, leading us to develop an inflated view of ourselves and an overly critical view of others. Godly relationships flourish best between two humble people who acknowledge their weaknesses and sins and their need for grace.

Can you identify self-righteousness in Shane and Kristin?

It is very possible each thinks he or she is more righteous than the other. Each is quite aware of the other's sin and works hard to get the other to see it, too, rather than looking at his or her own heart and seeking the help that only the Savior can provide.

5. Self-satisfaction: When we convince ourselves that satisfaction can be found apart from God, we can move in two different directions. We can try to find satisfaction in material things, which will lead to a disinterest in relationships or using them as a means to get what we want; or we can try to find satisfaction in people, using relationships for our own happiness.

How have Shane and Kristin turned to self-satisfaction?

With her girlfriends Kristin has replaced the community God wants her to have with Shane, and Shane has placed his energies and hope in his job. Neither is making the investments in the relationship they once loved to make.

6. Self-taught: When we are our own source of truth and wisdom, we forsake the humble, teachable spirit that is vital to a good relationship. We always take the role of mentor and give the impression that we have little if anything to learn from others.

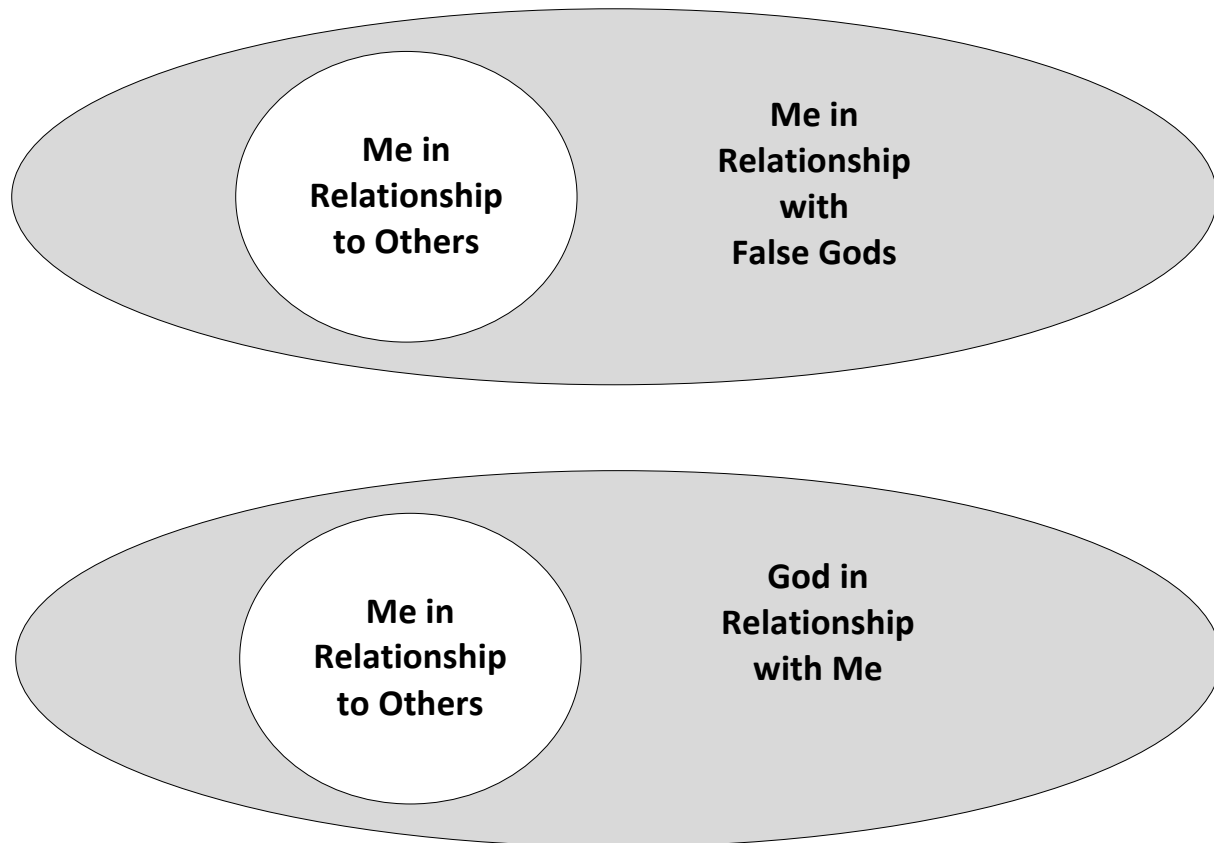
How do you see this attitude in Shane and Kristin?

They don't listen to the other's view and perspective; they don't try to understand.

Relationships can be a means of diagnosing our own weaknesses. The following chart summarizes the effects sin has on a person and his or her relationships. Using this chart, make a diagnosis of your own sinful condition.

	Seeks / Wants	Acceptable Cost	Nightmare / Fear	Others' Experience	Telltale Emotion / Action
Self-Centeredness	Attention, approval	Will sacrifice control and independence	Rejection, not being recognized or affirmed	Others feel used, minimized, smothered	Anxious, needy
Self-Rule	To be right, in control	Will sacrifice intimacy and unity	Being seen as wrong, being dependent	Others feel coerced, manipulated	Angry
Self-Sufficiency	Independence, time alone	Will sacrifice intimacy, mutually helpful community	The dependence and neediness of others	Others feel ignored, unappreciated	Cold, distant
Self-Righteousness	Being right in the eyes of others	Will sacrifice relationships that challenge or confront	Being wrong, guilty, or condemned	Others feel challenged, condemned, or dismissed	Aggressive, argumentative
Self-Satisfaction	Pleasure (self-defined)	Will sacrifice community if inconvenient	Others interfering with personal pleasure	Others feel like objects, not companions	Controlling, demanding, dissatisfied
Self-Taught	A platform for one's own opinion	Will sacrifice growing together if you disagree	Being told what to think, say, and do	Others feel patronized, disrespected	Opinionated, domineering

Whenever the things we want (false gods) become more important than God, even when we make relationships more important than God, our relationships suffer. The circle of human relationships was meant only to exist within the larger circle of community with God.



What About the Bad Things People Do to Me?

With what has been covered so far it may give the impression that our relationships are only harmed by our sin. But the Bible is full of exhortations calling us to exercise patience, forbearance, compassion, forgiveness and love; to revoke revenge and anger. The Bible mentions these things because God knows we will be sinned against. Like Shane, we are sometimes the victimizers; and like Kristin, we are sometimes the victims; and then there are times when we are both. Even when we are sinned against, we are still responsible for how we react. We all tend to sin in response to being sinned against, adding trouble to our trouble.

Can you identify with any of these responses to being sinned against?

I confess your sins to myself with bitterness: *I can't believe she did that to me!*
I confess your sins to another person in gossip: *Let me tell you what she did to me!*
I confess your sins to God, seeking vengeance: *God, when are you going to do something to the person who hurt me?*
I confess your sins to you in anger: *How dare you do such a thing to me?*

The Bible reminds us that even when we are sinned against, ultimately, before God, our biggest problem is still our own hearts' propensity to sin. Even when our hearts have been horribly damaged by the sins of others, we are to guard our hearts so that we are not sucked into sin's destructiveness. Being sinned against tempts us to sin. So our need for Christ is as big when we are sinned against as it is when we sin. God does not call us to passivity when we are sinned against, but our response is to be with patience, gentleness, self-control, humility, and forgiveness; not in vengeance, gossip, bitterness, or with a grudge. Holding the perpetrator "accountable" with a sinful spirit ends up perverting the very justice you seek.

Perhaps the messiness of relationships feels overwhelming. Is there any hope for restoration or for godly relationships?

What has God given us to help us navigate relationships in a fallen world?

His Word, which provides wise principles and promises; his Spirit, who convicts us when we are wrong, empowers us to seek forgiveness, and enables us to show compassion and self-control; his body of believers who can correct and encourage us; baptism, which identifies us a child of God and a member of his body; the Lord's Supper, which reminds us to maintain our unity with God and with other members of his family.

Two Mistakes

If we feel overwhelmed or have lost hope, we may be making two mistakes.

1. We may be thinking God's grace is supposed to deliver us from problems, when, in reality, God's grace often gives us the ability to persevere in the midst of problems. We desire the grace of relief while God gives the grace of empowerment.
2. We may be measuring our potential to deal with difficulty by the size and duration of the problems instead of measuring our potential according to the size of God's provisions. Even in the deepest difficulty, we are never without resources and never apart from God's presence.

Our problems have everything to do with sin, and our potential has everything to do with Christ!

Shane and Kristin did find grace for their struggle. They sought help. Listening to the other talk about his or her hurts was very difficult at first. But as they faced their struggle, they also saw something else. They began to see their God, not off in the distance somewhere but right there with them in the difficulty. As they began to trust him, they began to find the courage to trust each other again and continue to move toward each other.