



## **Relationship Tension**

**Ephesians 4:1-3**

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## RELATIONSHIP TENSION

### Ephesians 4:1-3

The best part of life is relationship with those we love, and the hardest part of life is relationship with those we love. Friends are important to us and family is precious to us. But relationships are hard work and tension is inevitable. Tension with your neighbor, tension with your boss, tension in your marriage, tension with your children ... it's inevitable. We say things we shouldn't. We do things we regret. We annoy each other. We let each other down. And too often, we hurt those we love the most.

At Christmas, I asked you to write down your most urgent prayer requests. We put them in red envelopes and hung them on the Christmas tree in the foyer. The idea was that if God loves us enough to send His Son to save us, then surely, He loves us enough to hear our prayers. I promised that after the Christmas the elders would pray over your cards, and this week we did. Can you guess what most of the prayer requests were about. Almost 60% were prayers for broken relationships. The greatest ache in most of our hearts is the ache of broken, estranged, difficult, and disappointing relationships.

This morning, I want to look at what the Scripture says and then help you apply that to the difficult relationships you may have in your life. I want to look at four of the most challenging responsibilities we have when it comes to relationships. These verses challenge our character. They demand maturity. They force us to grow. Four things you can and must do to have better relationships are humility, patience, forgiveness, and love.

The Apostle Paul summed up these four essential ingredients to healthy relationships in Ephesians 4:1-3. "I (Paul) urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3, NAS).

Four things you can and must do to have better relationships are humility, patience, forgiveness, and love.

## HUMILITY

The first thing you must do to have healthy relationships and to heal broken relationships is to walk in humility. "Walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all **humility** and gentleness" (Ephesians 4:2). ***Humility, because you're not always right.***

The biggest problem we have in relationships is that we think we're right and the other person is wrong. We can't help it. We can see the error in others, but we can't see it in ourselves. We have blind spots and it's hard to admit that we can be wrong. That's why humility is so important. It's realizing that you're not always right.

Humility was despised in Greek culture. Aristocratic Greeks looked down at the humble, at the lower class. They despised the servant, the slave, and the outcast. But Jesus turned humility into the highest virtue. The most humbling step ever taken was taken by Jesus. He stepped down from heaven to earth, from majesty to a manger, from comfort to a cross. That's why Paul said, "Put on the Lord Jesus" (Romans 13:14). That's why Peter said, "Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another" (1 Peter 5:5, NAS). Put on the clothes of humility. Dress yourself in humility. Put on Jesus Christ.

What is humility?

- Humility is realizing that you're not always right and humility is not always having to be right.
- Humility is not harsh, argumentative, or stubborn.
- Humility does not always have to get its way.
- Humility does not keep score.
- Humility is admitting our flaws and failures.
- Humility embraces the humanity of other people, accepting their flaws and failures without judging them.
- Humility is being aware of our own sin and how offensive that sin is to God.<sup>1</sup>
- Humility is being overwhelmed and blessed by the grace of God who forgives.
- Humility is being open and teachable to the advice and correction of others.
- Humility cares more about maintaining the relationship than winning the argument.

Humility is not easy, but it's the key to healthy relationships and to healing broken relationships. Philippians 2 says, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4, NAS). The first thing you must do to have better relationships and to heal broken relationships is to walk in humility. ***Humility, because you're not always right.***

## PATIENCE

Second is patience. ***Patience, because you're weird too.*** It's not just your Uncle Fred or your mother-in-law, you're weird too.

When God created Adam, He said, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). God created us with a need for relationship. But when Adam and Eve sinned, their sin trickled down throughout history to every human heart. Sin and selfishness are now our default. So, every relationship is two sinful, selfish people trying to get along. What could possibly go wrong?

We say things we shouldn't. We do things we regret. We annoy each other. We let each other down. And too often, we hurt those we love the most.

That's why Paul said, "I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, *with patience*, showing tolerance for one another in love" (Ephesians 4:1-3, NAS).

The Greek word for "patience" means long-tempered. It's being slow to anger. That's how the Bible describes God. David said, "You, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Psalm 86:15, NIV). And that's why Paul urges us to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling." We are to imitate God. We are to show the same patience to others that God has shown to us.

Another word for patience is forbearance. It's tolerating. It's enduring. It's putting up with. It doesn't mean ignoring sin or injustice, but it does mean being slow to anger and extending grace.

The key to patience, to "showing tolerance," is restraint. It's holding back. It's holding back your desire to win an argument or verbally put someone in their place. The Old Testament taught "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." If someone hurt you, you had the right to get even. But Jesus raised the standard. "But I say to you, do not retaliate against an evil person. Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:38-39). Retaliation will always inflame a situation, but restraint has a chance to calm the situation.

Patience is loving people who annoy you or irritate you. Patience is loving in spite of warts and weaknesses. Patience is loving people who hurt you or let you down. Patience says, "In spite of your quirks and mood swings, in spite of your weird family, in spite of your moments of temporary insanity, in spite of how your words hurt ... I still love you."

## FORGIVENESS

Healthy relationship requires humility, patience, and forgiveness. The word forgiveness is not in this passage, but I believe it is implied. "Showing tolerance for one another in love" requires forgiveness (Ephesians 4:2). *Forgiveness, because you make mistakes too.*

Peter often asked the questions nobody else dared to ask. This is one of them. Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" We wonder the same thing. How much do we have to forgive? When is enough ... enough? But here's what Jesus said. "Not seven times, but seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21-22).<sup>2</sup>

Rabbis taught that a person was required to forgive three times. Beyond that, there was no obligation to forgive. This came from their interpretation of what the Lord said to the prophet Amos. "For three transgressions (I will forgive) ... (but) for four I will not hold back My punishment."<sup>3</sup> The rabbis took this to mean that even God has His limits. He will forgive you three times but watch out on the fourth! They said there was a limit to forgiveness.<sup>4</sup> So, we should not be required to forgive more than God, right?

Peter tried to show that he had a bigger heart than the rabbis. So he offered to forgive not just three times, but up to seven times. Expecting to be commended, instead Jesus said, “No Peter. Not seven times, but seventy times seven!” Peter and the disciples were stunned. Did Jesus really expect them to forgive that much? Yes.

I imagine Peter was thinking it and I imagine you’re thinking it. “But wait a minute, Lord. You don’t understand my situation ... You don’t know my story ... You don’t know how bad it was ... You don’t know what he did to me!” It doesn’t matter. Jesus died on the cross for every sin, both great and small. He paid the penalty for every sin, both great and small. He has forgiven every sin, both great and small. And He expects us to do the same.

But it’s so hard to do. Why is it hard to forgive?

- “Because I don’t respect him, and I certainly don’t trust him. So how can I forgive him?”
- “Because I don’t want to be nice to him after what he did to me.”
- “Because I hope I never see that person again as long as I live.”
- “Because he doesn’t deserve my forgiveness.”
- “To forgive her would be like it never happened. But it did happen!”
- “To forgive him is to act like it didn’t hurt. But it did hurt.”
- “Because he hasn’t even thought about saying he’s sorry.”
- “Because I want justice. I want her to suffer the same way she made me suffer.”
- “I have to stand up for myself. Forgiving him would be letting him run all over me.”
- ***“Because it’s just not fair!”***

That’s how we feel. It’s just not fair! Neither was the grace of God that He showed us. And that’s why we forgive others. His grace toward us humbles us, softens us, and helps us forgive when it’s not fair. Forgiven people forgive ... over and over and over again.<sup>5</sup>

Forgiveness is ...

- turning the other cheek<sup>6</sup>
- giving up your right to get even
- resisting the urge to retaliate<sup>7</sup>
- refusing to resent or hate
- refusing to keep score<sup>8</sup>
- refusing to define that person by what they did to you
- seeing that person as God sees them; imperfect and flawed, yet valued and loved by Him

- humbly realizing that you've probably offended someone else just as bad as this person has offended you
- rebooting the relationship
- erasing the chalkboard

Let me add that forgiveness often includes confrontation. It is right for a wife to confront her husband's explosive anger. Forgiveness often includes boundaries to protect your own emotional or physical health. Forgiveness does not require full trust or partnership in the future. Forgiveness does not always mean complete reconciliation. For one thing, the other person may not be willing to reconcile or that person may be dead. Yet in our hearts, there must be forgiveness, releasing the person from the debt of how they hurt you.

What does Jesus really require of us? To do what God has done for us. To forgive over and over and over again.

## LOVE

Humility, patience, and forgiveness are necessary ingredients for healthy relationships and to heal broken relationships. But the greatest ingredient is love. *Love, because of how much Jesus loves us.*

Jesus declared love the greatest commandment. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39).<sup>9</sup> Love is the greatest commandment and love is the distinguishing characteristic of a follower of Jesus Christ. We are to "walk in love just as Christ loved us" (Ephesians 5:2). And that's why Paul said in Ephesians 4, "I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in *love*, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3, NAS).

First Corinthians 13 is called the love chapter. We most often hear it read at weddings, but it applies to every relationship. "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:4-8, NIV).

Notice the word "always." Love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." It's unconditional. No matter what. Loving when trust has been violated. Hoping for the best. Persevering the tension, enduring the harsh words, fighting for reconciliation. In the real-life pain of broken, difficult, disappointing, hurtful relationships, love is hard to do.

Yet, it is this kind of love that God asks of us. This is how God wants us to do family, to do marriage, to do church, to do all our relationships. There is no place for grudges or revenge. There is no place for writing people off or walking away. On our own, we can't do it. This kind of love must come from God. God loved us when we least deserved it, and He asks us to love those who perhaps don't deserve it as well. God help us love others the way You have loved us.

## REAL-LIFE STORIES

As I said earlier, 60% of our Christmas prayer requests were prayers for broken relationships. The greatest ache in most of our hearts is the ache of broken and estranged, difficult and disappointing relationships.

This is what many of you wrote. “Pray for my relationship with (my son, my daughter-in-law, my husband) ... Pray for peace in our home ... For family restoration ... For harmony in our family ... Lord, help me get my family back together ... Let us be a family again ... Pray that we would be able to love again ... Prayer for the separation from our adult children ... Pray that my adult children would return to Jesus.” And many of you prayed for the salvation of your adult children and grandchildren.

Nothing in life means more to us than our relationships with those we love, and nothing in life hurts more than when those relationships are stressed or broken. Many of you said that the dominant ache in your heart is tension with your adult children.

I have several friends who are experiencing that as well. So this week, I contacted a few of my friends and asked them to describe the ache they feel over the broken and estranged, difficult and disappointing relationships with their adult children. I want to keep their stories confidential and mask the details. But you can imagine the scenarios. An adult child who has failed to launch and become an adult. An adult child with addiction problems or legal problems, mental or emotional problems. Conflict with a daughter-in-law or son-in-law. An adult child who is not walking with God or does not even believe in God. You can imagine the scenarios because you’re living some of them.

I asked these friends to describe the ache they feel over the difficult relationship with their adult children, and here’s what they said.

- “I feel very sad. And after feeling that for so long, I’ve become numb. Numb to both my sadness and numb to my daughter. And I feel guilty for feeling that way.”
- “We feel overwhelming sadness. My wife and I came to realize that for a long time we’ve been grieving the loss of our son. The loss of his love. The loss of relationship. It’s a grief that keeps going and there’s no end in sight.”
- “The emotions are intense. Sadness, hurt, anger, sorrow, grief, helplessness, frustration, uncertainty. I fear for my son’s life! I feel guilt and wonder if I’ve done enough and wonder what I did wrong. I feel heartbreak that actually manifests itself in chest pains and shortness of breath and elevated blood pressure. And when it’s really bad, when the relationship has been intense, it drains me so much that it takes days to recover.”
- “I’m angry, I’m sad, and I’m exhausted. I get angry with him for not taking advantage of the many times we’ve stepped in to help him get out of trouble or recover from his mistakes. I get angry with myself for not knowing how to help him. And I get angry with God for not answering my prayers that I’ve prayed for years. And I’m sad because I don’t see a happy ending. The journey is like

a long, slow motion train wreck. I know it's coming and there's nothing I can do about it. I consider myself an emotionally strong person, but this struggle with my son has brought me to the point of exhaustion."

Each of my friends talked about praying, reading books, going to counseling, being in support groups. Each of them feel like they have done all they can do and feel guilty that it's not enough. And each of them live with a sadness and grief that won't go away. I asked each of them what they would say to others who were enduring a difficult relationship and here's what they said.

- "I've continued to pursue the relationship with my daughter, even though it feels like I'm the only one who is interested. But I've determined that when it comes to being right or maintaining a relationship, I'm going to choose the relationship. I've had to forgive the hurtful things she has said and I've had to choose love."
- "Seek God and let Him minister to your heart. He knows you're hurting. I've also had to consider what He is trying to teach me. After years of seeing what was wrong with my son, the Lord directed my eyes back to my own heart. What do I need to learn? And when I ask that, I feel God close to me. I know He's still working in my life. I know that He has not left me, and that helps me trust that He has not left my son either."
- I respect the advice from this friend who has endured this difficult relationship for years. He shared what it took for him to survive it all. "Take care of yourself. The pain takes a toll on you. It's not selfish to take care of yourself. Praise God in the midst of it. He's worthy and He deserves it. Cry. Don't bottle it up, let it out. Forgive. This is my daughter. Hurting people hurt people, and she's hurting too. Trust. My life is in God's hands and I've got to trust that her life is in His hands too."

We live in a broken world. I sin, you sin, we all sin. All of us are accomplices in broken relationships. And, we live in a world where spiritual warfare is a reality, where Satan is out to destroy families, marriages, and relationships. The mess is inevitable, but it's not beyond healing.

### **WHAT YOU CAN AND MUST DO**

When it comes to relationship problems, what can you do? Here's what you can and must do to improve the relationship. Here's the overarching principle. Romans 12:18, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Do your part. Do all you can. In one of Solomon's proverbs, he said, "When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7, NAS). Your part is to make sure your ways are pleasing to the Lord. Your part is humility, patience, forgiveness, and love. Your part is to make sure you are pleasing God and obeying Him. Then it's up to Him, as Solomon said, to make peace between you and your enemies. Again, "As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

And here are some specific things you can do.



***Look at yourself first.*** I know it may come as a surprise to you, but you're weird too, you're not always right, and you make mistakes. You're not perfect. You can be difficult to get along with too. That's why the Bible says, "Walk ... with all humility" (Ephesians 4:2). Look at yourself first, and ask yourself, "What am I doing to make this relationship worse?" and "What can I do to make it better?"

***React softly.*** "Walk ... with gentleness" (Ephesians 4:2). Solomon said, "A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare" (Proverbs 15:1, NLT). Harsh words, anger, arguing, retaliation will always inflame a situation; but restraint, reacting softly, can defuse the situation and create an atmosphere for something positive to happen.

***Be patient and show grace.*** "Walk ... with patience" (Ephesians 4:2). Patience is being long-tempered and slow to anger. It's tolerating, enduring, and putting up with. It's extending grace. I need God's grace every day and I'm so thankful He gives it and that He is patient with me. So be patient and extend that same grace to others.

***Have the tough conversation.*** The Bible tells us to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). The truth must be told, and love must be shown at the same time. Unaddressed, unresolved conflict can devour a relationship like weeds in a garden. The only way to make a relationship better is through honest conversation. It's as simple as saying, "I need to talk to you about something that's bothering me, that is hurting me. When you do \_\_\_\_, I feel \_\_\_\_." If a difficult relationship is not getting better, and only getting worse, it's time for the tough conversation. You've got to let the other person know how their behavior is affecting you.

***Apologize and forgive.*** Easier said than done. Apologize for your part and forgive them for their part. If you have offended someone, if you have been the difficult person, then apologize. If you're the wounded one, then forgive. To heal a relationship, you've got to be willing to say two things – "I'm sorry" and "I forgive you."

***Set boundaries.*** There comes a point when we need to set healthy boundaries. You should never tolerate abuse; whether it's physical, sexual, or verbal. You may need to extract yourself from a situation to protect yourself. That may mean separation, or even divorce. That may mean limiting interactions with your own children. It may mean making some difficult, yet concrete decisions. It's okay to protect yourself from a hurtful and unhealthy situation. It's okay to set boundaries.

***Continue to love and pray for them.*** The only way a relationship can get better and heal is with a commitment to love and pray, to love and pray, after you've done that, love and pray some more.

"I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3, NAS). "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18).

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Peter fell at Jesus' feet and said, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8, NAS). Paul once said, "Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and I am the worst of them all" (1 Timothy 1:15, NLT).

<sup>2</sup> Now, some translations read "seventy-seven," (NIV) but that's not 77 times. It's seventy sevens, or "seventy times seven" (NAS). See Daniel 9:24 concerning the prophecy of the "seventy weeks." These 490 years was time from Daniel's prophecy to the coming of the Messiah.

<sup>3</sup> Scan Amos for this repeated phrase.

<sup>4</sup> See William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1975), page 193.

<sup>5</sup> Colossians 3 says, "As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:12-13, NIV).

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew 5:39.

<sup>7</sup> See Romans 12:14, 15-17.

<sup>8</sup> Forgiveness makes the sin of no account. That's what Paul meant when he said love "does not take into account a wrong suffered" (1 Corinthians 13:5).

<sup>9</sup> Paul added, "Walk in love just as Christ loved you and gave Himself up for us" (Ephesians 5:2).