

Relationships and the Nature of God

Good morning. I'm glad you all decided to come to our study today. We are officially in the holiday season. For some reason God has decided in His Sovereign and Perfect timing to have all these holidays close together.

- We've had the one associated with eating a lot of food.
 - I'm speaking from a worldly perspective here.
- Next is the one associated with gifts.
- Then a week later its the one associated with a new start. A new beginning, fresh start where we resolve to improve from the previous year.
 - Christians can miss the point of these at times. We need to always be renewing our minds.
- One thing that is true about this time of the year is that these holidays traditionally are focused around a group of people getting together and socializing. Person to person or people to people relating to one another in one form or another.
- We can know this by our reaction to hearing about someone who can't come home for the holidays.
 - Or someone like an Ebenezer Scrooge who purposely shuts others out.
 - This makes us sad for the person. We want them to be with others and spend quality time with them.
- The benefit of the holiday season is that, with the onset of colder weather, people tend to stay inside more and are less inclined to get out and interact with others. Holidays give us an opportunity to be festive and socialize. Traditionally people get together and spend time with one another and its while we are interacting with family, friends, and coworkers that challenges can arise.

This is a topic no one can get away from and everyone needs to understand. **We all are part of relationships.**

I'm not just talking about relationships with respect to dating. Though that is one we will discuss, but I'm talking about all the relationships we have around us.

We relate to different people in different ways.

You have your Employer - Employee relationship,
the mother/father - son/daughter relationship,
sibling relationship,
neighbor to neighbor,
Coworker relationship,
the relationships we have in our church,
marriage,
courting/dating,

a big one in my life is my relationship with my barista (that's the person who makes my coffee at the coffee shop).

We can't escape relationships and yet they don't work like they should all the time. Having to deal with flawed people in a broken world can make one wonder if some relationships are even worth it.

As part of this Genesis 3 world relationships can get messy. I'm going to be using Paul Tripp and Tim Lane's book entitled "Relationships a mess worth making".

You don't have to be reading the book along with us to benefit from this class. I would highly recommend the book, but don't feel like if you haven't read it you can't come. This is not the case.

Please feel free to come as often as you like and join with us.

The hand outs will provide the information you need for each week. I'm also going to add a few questions, as you can see today, at the bottom of your hand out as homework for you. You don't necessarily need to bring it back and report in, but my hope is that these questions will help with application and spur you on to love and good deeds.

Let me pray for us.

I want to start out with a big question for you to ponder a bit. "Do you see and treat relationships as God intends for you?"

Our goal today is to answer that question in two parts: How God intends for your relationships to be (in a broad sense) and are you living in light of that.

I need your help right now. I want to brainstorm a little bit. Let's as a group come up with as many words as we can that come to mind when we hear the word relationships. No matter what they are let us know.

Very good. Thank you.

Have you ever avoided a neighbor or a co-worker? Ever choose to just swallow how you really feel because the work involved, if you really opened up, doesn't seem worth it?

- The difficulty of relationships can lead to families sharing the same space without sharing meaningful contact,
- small group meetings becoming formality with no attempt to share in the lives of others,
- and neighbors living side by side without knowing anything significant about one another.
- I think we all would agree that this isn't a valid way to live. We all have some sort of a desire for self protection, but we can't keep to ourselves so that we don't get hurt or hurt someone else.

- Playing it safe becomes not playing in the game at all. Oddly enough, we can live with a tension between self-protective isolation and the desire for meaningful relationships. We can on one hand avoid the discomfort that often is created by relationships, but at the same time, know that we aren't living as we should when we are alone. Every relational decision we make tends to move along continuum of either isolation or immersion. Sometimes we find ourselves at an extreme end of it; we are tempted to make relationships either less or more than they were intended to be.

Because we tend toward one of these characteristics in the continuum our relationships tend to fit one of three profiles. I just need to be clear here, these are the extreme ends of the spectrum for our presentation sake. We all are somewhere on the continuum and we need to understand which way we lean. As we look at each one we are going to think about a couple of things: what would a vacation look like to each person in the relationship and how would it feel to live in this type of a relationship.

- The Frustrated Relationship: In this relationship, one person moves toward isolation and the other moves toward immersion. One dreams of being safe; the other dreams of being close and intimate. So vacation looks like just sitting, reading, and quiet for the person who tends toward isolation while the person who leans toward immersion may want lots of activities to do together.
 - The isolationist can feel smothered while the immersionist feels rejected. Because both feel like their expectations are unmet, they both feel frustrated and disappointed, which may eventually lead to anger between them.
- The Enmeshed Relationship: Here both people move toward immersion. Both parties are relationally dependent on the other. This may seem like a pretty good set up at first glance, but let's step back a minute and really look at this. They might spend every waking moment together and ignore other relationships. This is how I view newlyweds. They just can't get enough of each other. But that high can't be sustained.
 - Newlyweds aside for right now, if we have two immersionists in a relationship and because they are so dependent on each other, they can be easily hurt when the other does not meet their expectation, which can lead them to be highly critical of the other. They can feel discouraged because no matter how hard they try, they can never measure up to the other person's expectations. This kind of relationship is exhausting because much energy is spent dealing with minor offenses.
- The Isolated Relationship: In this relationship both persons move toward isolation. Both make relational decisions based on maintaining safety. They "need" their time to themselves. They want their own space. They are moving away from each other not toward each other.
 - Their perfect vacation looks like both of them spending time alone reading different books. Now the difficulty arises because they are both desiring safety while at the same time desiring connection. This is because we are designed to desire connection. This makes them feel empty and disappointed.

When things go wrong in relationships, because we are in a Genesis 3 world, the problem is often rooted in the heart and in the expectations we bring to the relationships, whether it is our expectation for safety or dependency.

- One thing that I have come to learn over the years also, is that our tendencies can change. God can convict us to come out of our shell and to be involved more with others. But a stumbling block can be that we then take the momentum from that and the pendulum can swing to the other extreme.

- All this is because of our heart issue. This is why we need to seek God's expectations for our relationships: We need to see what purpose God intends relationships to serve in our lives. We need to know, as persons created in the image of God, what our relationships should look like.

- How many of you would agree with me this morning that having a model or an example to follow is a very important part of succeeding in almost any endeavor...

- having someone to watch, or someone you can pattern yourself after makes the path much easier to navigate...

- Pastor Steve Viars and his wife have an adopted son Andrew who is around 19...

- He gave this example in one of his sermons and I thought it was spot on for what we are about to discuss.

- Andrew is blind...and he struggles with a number of other physical and mental difficulties...

- though they are blessed by Andrew and what he brings to their family, there are challenges.

- one of them was that Drew did not learn to walk until he was 7 years old...

- and there were some sensory issues with his feet where it was uncomfortable and then painful to put any weight on them...

- but the doctors explained another part of the challenge that I would have never thought about...

- they said that eyesight has a significant impact on walking because seeing something you want is what motivates a child to try to get up and go get it...and (this is what really surprised me) also being able to watch another child walk gives you an idea of how to do it...

- it never crossed my mind that something as simple as walking would be significantly impacted by the power of a model, or an example to follow...

- and conversely, not being able to see could have an incredibly negative impact on your ability to succeed...

Understanding this gives us perspective when someone says

- for example, – I have never seen anyone change...

- it is hard for me to have hope that I could be anything better than I am right now because I've never seen it happen to anyone else...

- this isn't a man being stubborn or argumentative...

- he was being honest – I don't have a model...I don't have an example... I've never seen it happen...

- or someone who says, I've never seen a marriage that worked...
 - my parents divorced, her parents divorced, all our friends have now divorced...
 - why should we stick this out when it is just going to lead to more misery?...
- by the way, that is one of the reasons it is so important to be in a church, not because it is filled with perfect people by any stretch of the imagination...but because there are many people here who are dramatically different than they used to be...and the ability to see that kind of model and example is extremely powerful...
- but when that is not in place...progress can be stalled or perhaps even stopped... Without a biblical model to explain the place relationships should have in our lives, we will likely experience imbalance, confusion, conflicting desires, and general frustration.
- Since we are made in the image of God, we cannot talk about the nature of human relationships without first thinking about the nature of God.
 - Turn with me to John 17:20-26
- In this passage Jesus is praying for all those who will believe in him, and He prays for their unity - that they would be one. It is relevant that as Jesus looks back on His public ministry and all it was meant to accomplish, and looks forward to the cross and all it was ordained to produce, His focus is riveted on community! Of all the things Christ could pray for at this moment, He prays for the unity of His people.
- Jesus wants us to have the same community with God and with others that He has with the Father and the Holy Spirit. We can see this community in Genesis 1:26, where God speaks in the plural, "Let us make man in our image..." Among many other passages.
- God knows how to help us with our struggles with community because He is a community. We tend to think of God as an individual; but while God is one, the Bible also says He exists in three persons; the trinity. If you have heard of any of the kerfuffle going on with James MacDonald and the elephant room, you'll know that there is an issue with the Trinity. James MacDonald isn't denying the Trinity, but he has invited Bishop T.D. Jakes as a part of this "conference".
- From the elephant room website:
- "The Elephant Room is more than an event. It is the outgrowth of an idea. The idea that the best way forward for the followers of Jesus lies not in crouching behind walls of disagreement but in conversation among all kinds of leaders about what the scriptures actually teach. We must insist on the biblical Gospel, right doctrine and practice but not isolate ourselves from relationship even with those who believe much differently.
- These are conversations about the most Christ honoring ways of building a church. Our goal is unity, however a true unity cannot be fashioned in pretense or denial of truth nor can it be won among those who prefer sectarianism to the unity Jesus prayed for. To advance Christ's call to unity we must do what men have always done, we must push and prod and challenge and sharpen each other's beliefs and methods.

Fidelity and fruitfulness, both matter. No one has a corner on the truth and methods must do more than 'work.'

- Here's the problem here: Bishop T.D. Jakes is a modalist. That means that he doesn't believe in the Trinity. He believes that God will display Himself in one of three ways: Father, Son, HS. So if that is the case then we don't believe the same Gospel. We can't.
- So what a lot of people we read, listen to, and agree with are asking the question "Why invite him when you say there is unity, yet we are on different foundations?" Our hope is that James will address this with him preaching the true Gospel,
 - That we are saved by grace alone from God, through faith alone in Jesus Christ. Who was the propitiation for our sins while God stayed on His throne in Heaven and sovereignly ordained it.
- So we see that God Himself is a model to us of a loving, cooperative, unified community where diversity is an asset and not a liability.
- So if God is Himself a community, to be human, made in God's likeness, means we were created to be in community; we were created as social beings. Just look at all the social networks out there:
 - Facebook, Twitter, etc.
- In Genesis 2:18 as God looks at His creation before the fall, He says, "It is not good for man to be alone." Community with one another is not only a duty; it is an aspect of our humanity.
- From Christ's prayer (John 17) we see that human community is to be a means of reflecting God's glory to the world, that the world may believe in God the Father and God the Son. Furthermore, God has a purpose for our relationships; therefore, our relationships must be shaped by what God intends and not by what we want. Does that make sense?
- So why do we need Christ praying for us?
 - Because we are flawed; we are sinners; we can't manufacture true community on our own. Sin's self-centeredness cuts us off from God and others.
- Also notice that Jesus prays that we would not only have community and unity with one another, but that we would have community with God. We are invited to be a part of this divine community! And it is out of this community that we can experience community with one another. In fact, we can't move toward community with one another until we have been drawn into community with God.
- God has given us a way, in spite of the ongoing presence of sin, to be empowered to have meaningful relationships. The Spirit who allowed Christ to minister in a fallen world is the same Spirit who dwells within us to allow us to minister in a fallen world.
- Another key point here from this passage, looking at the context, is that Christ is facing death on a cross so that our relationship to God can be restored and so that our relationships with others can be glorifying to Him.

- Think with me here. We all go through stages of life...
 - Birth, adolescents, adulthood and everything in between. What can you identify that shows we were designed to be in community with others?
- Let's go back to our list of words. Do we have any words here that should be the focus of our thoughts about relationships? After we've talked, do you think there are any words we should add?

Folks God designed us to be relational - it is our very nature, and it is one way in which we reflect the image of God. And *only* when we live in community do we fully reflect the likeness of God. Relationships aren't optional.

- They can be messy
- Problems in our relationships are often rooted if not most of the time rooted in our selfish desires.
- If there are problems in your relationships, the solution starts with God; the circle of human community is only healthy when it exists within the larger circle of community with God.

Relationships- The Problem and the Solution

Review -

- We saw relationships are quite important to God
 - John 17
 - Christ prayed before crucifixion for unity
- Where does true human community grow?
 - We are made in image of God
 - The Trinity
 - We live in community because God is a community

I have three sons: Brent is 5, Owen is 3, and Eli is 1. My two oldest boys have a close relationship that makes my heart happy. They fight and quarrel, they hit and bite sometimes, but for the most part they interact very well together. A few weeks ago Brent, Owen, and I were in the van together running some errands. They started bickering and Owen through a book at Brent. It hit him right across the nose and instantly made is nose bleed. As I was tending to Brent I asked Owen why he did it. He told me that Brent made him mad. I asked him what Brent did and he said that Brent wouldn't read the book to him. I didn't bring this up to Owen at the time, but Brent can't read. So it was a fruitless endeavor to try and get his brother to read this book to him.

In that moment Owen revealed his heart. He wanted what he wanted and he wanted it right then. If no one was going to give it to him he would lash out. I like using my children as examples because they don't have the years of experience we adults have of putting up walls, smoke screens and filters to try and hide our sin. They don't have the expertise we have perfected in deflecting, twisting, or throwing misdirection so it seems that we are not in sin. We are like these magicians that say look here and while the crowd is focused on what he wants them to be looking at, with a slight of hand he makes something appear over there. When really if you had been looking over there you would have seen how he did it. We blame shift to get the focus off of us and our sin and put the focus somewhere else.

So our Big Question for this week that we want to answer in this lesson is: Where do the problems in relationships lie and can they be repaired?

Pray

You have on your handout a list of 15 questions. I want you to take a few moments here and read through those questions and think about your different relationships. Think about the good relationships you have and the really tough ones. Ask yourself these simple questions.

Even in our most satisfying relationship, we can probably answer yes to all or most of these questions. At some point or another in our best and most satisfying relationships the other person has let us down. They have misunderstood us. They have said something that hurt us. Even in our most satisfying relationships, there are struggles

and temptations, quarrels and conflicts. So if we can answer yes to most of these questions for our best relationships, 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.

We see in 2 Timothy 3:1-5 symptoms of the problem. This is a pretty striking list. *“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.”* Now these are just symptoms that point to the actual problem. Just like you don’t have a cold because you have a headache, runny nose, cough, and a fever. Those are the identifying criteria that point to what is wrong inside you that helps the doctor know that you are suffering from a cold.

The problem is laid out in James 4:1- “What causes fights and quarrels among you?” Folks it is so easy to be tempted blame things outside of us or outside of our control for our behavior. How many of us have said or thought something like “I spoke that way because I was tired”, “He made me do it”, “I wouldn’t have responded that way if she had a right response”, “You are just being too sensitive”. Thankfully James answers this question by reminding us that our real problem is not located outside of ourselves, but is rather inside us. Further on he says “Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?” We allow our selfish desires to rule over us instead of God, and this leads to problems, conflicts, and disappointments. This role reversal we are discussing - making ourselves ultimate number one and God secondary- is what the Bible calls sin.

Let’s explore our sinful condition a bit. This is our continual battle as believers.

Turn with me to read Romans 7:21-25

Let’s identify from that passage some words or phrases Paul uses to describe his sinful condition.

[**Law of sin** - sin is an inescapable principle in our lives that we will never be free from this side of glory; **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]

So our conclusion from this is that our biggest problem, the problem with our relationships, is inside us (our hearts) and we can’t repair it on our own. Let’s do a case study together to help illustrate this point. On your outline you have a case study in the basic effects of sin.

Sin erodes relationships by affecting us in six basic ways. We are going to identify these eroding influences in Shane and Kristin.

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.
 - a. Can you identify? - 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 wreck havoc.
 - a. Can you identify? - They respond to each other by trying to take control - Shane tries to dominate Kristin with criticism and demands; while 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 on 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.
 - a. How have these two 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 the 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.
 - a. Can you identify? - 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.

- a. How have these turned to self-satisfaction? - With her girlfriends Kristin has replaced the community God wants her to have with Shane, and Shane has replaced 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.
 - a. How do you see this playing out in their relationship? - 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. When problems arise is a good time to step back and see what part you play in the problem. I find that I can get a better perspective on myself and look truthfully at my own weaknesses when I'm not wrapped up in the heat of problems. There is a chart in your handout that summarizes the effects sin has on a person and their relationships. I would encourage you to take some time this week and look over that chart. Review it and diagnose areas where you tend to fall into sin.

The truth is, when whenever the things we want out of relationships become more important than God, our relationships suffer. That's because we've made these things our false god. The circle of human relationships was meant only to exist within the larger circle of community with God.

What we've discussed so far 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 responses like:

Saying to yourself - *I can't believe she did that to me!*

Telling another person - *Let me tell you what he did to me!*

Confessing someone else's sins to God - *God, when are you going to do something to that person who hurt me?*

Or go directly to the person - *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 doesn't 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, slander, or with a grudge. Holding the perpetrator "accountable" with a sinful spirit ends up perverting the very justice you seek.

Perhaps this whole messiness of relationships feels or seems overwhelming. Sometimes there just doesn't seem to be any hope for restoration or for godly relationships. But there is hope which comes in the form of resources God has given us. Can you help me with somethings God has given us to help us navigate our relationships in this Genesis 3 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
- Body of believers (The Church) - who can correct and encourage us
- Baptism - This outwardly identifies us as 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

Now if you are feeling overwhelmed or have lost hope, you may be making two mistakes.

1. You 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. You may be measuring your potential to deal with difficulty by the size and duration of the problems instead of measuring your 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 our sin, and our potential has everything to do with Christ!

We've clearly established that in this Genesis 3 world relationships can and eventually will get messy and require work. This is because our problems are inside us and we need God's grace in our relationships. That's not to say though that we just let go and let God. As we are expecting these difficulties our responsibility is to examine our own hearts, confess our sins that lead to the conflict or were committed as a result of the conflict, ask for forgiveness, repent, seek restoration, and to be daily walking in the

Word, while surrounding ourselves with godly accountability, wise counsel, and good fellowship in the local church.

Relationships - God's Workshop

BIG QUESTION - In your relationships, whose agenda will you seek, God's or your own?

You've got a few statements on your handout that are good and show positive areas in a relationship, but can you identify where there may be an underlying agenda in them?

- I'm 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 a relationship that I can really feel comfortable and safe in.
- Before I met you, I was so lonely.

We've all seen wealthy celebrities give sizable donations to worthy causes. Just imagine an interview where 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. Please don't think I'm trying to make all of us skeptical here.

I'm starting here by saying that there are two themes about relationships that are 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.

Since we've started these lessons you may have thought about this. It's always good to take sometime for reflection in our lives. To look at where we are, where we are headed, and see how this falls within what God wants for our lives based on Scripture. Have you ever really thought about what your dreams are for your relationships?

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!

Tom Simpson builds furniture and he and I have had discussions about veneering pieces of furniture. One way of veneering is where you build a piece of furniture out of an inexpensive material like a plywood or MDF and then you veneer or bond a very thin piece of cover wood to it. In the process you cut and trim these pieces of veneer and then use tools to press and adhere it to the wood shape or piece of furniture you've made. You make it conform to the

shape of the underlying form. I know that if we look too hard at analogies they will all break down so please don't pick this one apart too much. The idea is the same. God wants to conform us into the image of Christ. He is our model, just like the table we build out of MDF, and we are the veneer. The cutting and forming that is done to it is done by God through our relationships. The pressure, molding, forming, shaping are brought on and through our relationships and sovereignly ordained by our heavenly Father so we look like His Son.

Do your dreams for your relationships include the loving molding by God into Christ's image?

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. We are going to look at Ephesians 4 today to see what God wants our relationships to be. Go ahead and turn to Ephesians 4 right now. We are going to break this chapter down in sections. First let's look at 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.

Ephesians 4:1-6.

Paul says here, **“Maintain the unity of the Spirit.”** Paul is telling us 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?

He goes on to say **“Make every effort.”** Help me out here a little bit...What is it about hard work that 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. A good thing to ask yourself may be is there a relationship I should put more work and effort into?

“Be humble, gentle, patient, and forbearing in love.” Even before Paul mentions specific actions, he describes four key character qualities that are sometimes the opposite of what drives our relationships.

1. Humility: This quality enables us to see our own sin before we focus on the sin and weaknesses of another. In your relationships this shows up in many ways. One way is holding others to a higher standard than you do yourself.

2. 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. Someone who isn't gentle ends up walking over others and the people getting walked on feel bruised in their relationship with this person.
3. Patience: This quality places others' needs higher than or at the same level as our own. If we are being patient we don't come with a self-centered agenda.
4. Forbearance: A forbearing person is a person who is humble, gentle, and patient even when provoked. Not having forbearance looks like loving people with limits. These limits are driven by our own perceived needs or interests. This makes 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. Do you see that? We get along because Father, Spirit, and Son have allowed us to do so.

Since we are made in God's image and called to be like Him; tell me ways in which God has shown Himself humble, patient, gentle, and forbearing.

Jesus was humble in becoming man and dying on the cross; the Father gently and patiently works out our salvation; the Holy Spirit forbears and abides with us even in the face of our sin, convicting and correcting but never condemning.

Oftentimes we see diversity as a hinderance to good relationships and God's purposes. Let's look at Ephesians 4:7-16

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, which is 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 appointment. God surrounds us with different people to promote His purpose. It is often easy and we tend to get along with people who are like us, but it can be a challenge to get along or want to with people who aren't like us.

“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 is also when we are not getting along with others that He is accomplishing His purposes!

Here's an example that may help: 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.

Think of a relationship in your life that has problems because you are two very different people. You need to be willing to see those differences as God's design so that you may both be built up in Christ. Think about what God may want to teach you or reveal to you through this relationship.

Ephesians 4:17-32

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 we then can experience the antidotes to those 7 tendencies of the sinful heart.

- We see in verses 19-24 how much wiser God's plan is for us than our plan for ourselves. We have to put off the old self, which is our sinful tendency and put on the new self, which is God's grace in our lives.
- In verse 25 we see the life-changing power of truthfulness. You may have heard someone ask "When does a liar stop being a liar?" Well, from this verse we see the answer. It isn't when they stop lying, but rather when they start telling the truth. We are members of one another, as part of the body of Christ, and we are called to be truth tellers.
- Throughout this passage we are reminded of the healing benefit of gentleness, patience, and love. Verse 27 tells us to give no opportunity to the devil. Obviously, if we aren't being gentle, patient, and loving we are giving the devil a foothold.
- When we are faced with our own selfishness we see that we are robbing ourselves of the joy of serving the needs of someone else (v. 28). This thief is doing honest work so that he is prepared to give. If we live a life always ready to give of our time, talents, energy, gifts, or money then we are much less likely to be selfish and we look for opportunities to interact with others.
- The value of loving and wholesome communication outlined in verses 29 and 30, show us that our tongue not only affects us and our relationships with one another, but it also affects our relationship with God.
- From verse 31 we can see the beauty of functional unity in a relationship. If we put these things away and focus on unity our relationships will be blessed and a blessing.
- Verse 32 tells us the freedom of practicing forgiveness. We forgive because we've been forgiven. And because we've been forgiven the way we have shows that we have no right not to extend forgiveness to anyone.

God wants to use the struggles of our relationships as a means for our growth and sanctification. Like a rock-climbing wall - it takes work, but the work is satisfying when you see where you began and where you ended up; obstacles are in the way but the obstacles are tools for getting to the top if you use them that way. Likewise, relationships are work but can be quite satisfying as we grow and mature, and our struggles don't have to be obstacles but rather tools in God's hands if we submit. If you look at your own character, you may find some of your deepest growth has been born out of great stress and trial.

We have to remember that God has an agenda for our relationships. This agenda is spelled out in Scripture, but unfortunately it is often different from our own agenda. We need to remember that through God's grace we are enabled to overcome temptations to sin against one another and to show gentleness, patience, humility, and forbearance along with all other fruits of the Spirit. These relationships are a gift from God that require work and will bring conflict, but this is a tool from God to mold us into His image. We need to battle our sinful tendencies through God's grace and apply God's agenda to our relationships.

Relationships and Communication

Good morning and welcome.

Pray.

So last week we watched a video on worship. Paul Tripp does such a great job. Sometimes I wish I could be like him, but unfortunately I just can't grow a mustache like that. Oh well.

A quick review from last week: Part of that discussion focused on our identity and worship. Now when we talk about identity, we are talking about how we define ourselves - the talents, qualities, experiences, achievements, beliefs, relationships, and dreams we as individuals use to say "this is who I am." When we talk about worship, we are talking about the things we live for - our desires, goals, treasures, purposes, values or cravings that control our hearts. God wants, and deserves, to be the defining center of both of these things. These foundational issues of identity and worship are an inescapable part of our nature as human beings. What we believe about these two things and what we do about these two things will shape the way we live with the people God has placed in our lives. When we live out of a biblical sense of who we are (identity) and rest on who God is (worship), we will be able to build healthy relationships.

A functional part of these two foundational stones of our relationships is communication. Relationships don't happen without communication. Communication is constantly happening. We are always communicating. We convey to people something by what we say and how we say it, how we interact with them, and our non-verbal actions (such as tone of voice, facial expressions, pauses or silences).

Communication is an intrinsic and inherent part of our lives as mankind. We can't get away from it. Wrongly we often think that our communication is just ordinary. It happens all the time so we don't put much thought into it. But we have to be careful because our communication largely takes place in the inconsequential moments of everyday life, and so it is easy to underestimate its significance. The moments are rare when what we say will literally be life changing. What sets the course of a person's life are the ways he responds to the little moments. The character developed in a thousand little moments is what you carry into the big, important moments.

Your everyday communication influences the shape, quality, and direction of your relationships. Everyday your words give your relationships their tone. Every day you tell people what you think of them, what you want from them, and what you would like to enjoy with them. But you don't do this in grand moments of oratory. You do it in quick side comments in the bedroom as you get ready for work, or at the coffee pot at work, or in the parking lot as you are leaving for the day, or over dessert at the local bistro, at dinner with your family, or in the family room during a commercial. Life happens in the mundane.

Let's read 2 Corinthians 5:20.

Here we see that we are given a job description: ambassadors. This job description is significant to our relationships, both with God and others. Since we are called Ambassadors for Christ, we are God's representatives here on earth. Which in turn focuses on the fact that God rules as King. This then is significant in our communication with others because as God's representatives we speak on His behalf.

As ambassadors, we do one thing - represent Christ. As ambassadors, it is our job to incarnate a king who is not present. The king's interests will direct every word we speak. Therefore, as ambassadors, what we say must be driven by what God is seeking to accomplish in us and in other people.

Go back a couple verses to 2 Corinthians 5:14-19.

What does this say God is trying to accomplish? (Reconciliation)

God is working in every situation and in every relationship to reclaim our wandering hearts, and He calls us to speak in a way that has this reconciliation in view. Unfortunately, we lose sight of reconciliation in many ways: When we flatter friends when we want them to like us. When we trim the truth to avoid a conflict. When we yell at our children about their messy rooms. When winning an argument is all we care about. When we indulge in gossip. When we are better at pointing out wrong than asking for forgiveness. When we use words to hurt others rather than help them. When our communication stays resolutely impersonal. When our words make us the center of attention.

Here is the point: our words are always in pursuit of some kind of kingdom. Just like we heard last week when discussing worship. We are either speaking as mini-kings, seeking to establish our will in our relationships and circumstances, or we are speaking as ambassadors, seeking to be part of what the King is doing. And when two mini-kings talk to each other, the battle of words has no end! When our words reflect the self-focused desires of our hearts rather than God's work of reconciliation, our struggle has no end. When we use words to establish our will rather than submit to God's, we plunge into difficulty. If we are ever to be helped, this is where we must start.

There has never been a good relationship without good communication, and there has never been a bad relationship that didn't get that way in part because of something that was said. The Bible has much to say about our world of talk. The Bible does not consider this area of life ordinary or unimportant. In fact, it does the opposite. It assigns words that extraordinary value they actually deserve.

Scripture says our words have power. The Message, a paraphrase of the Bible, translates Proverbs 18:21 this way: "Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or

fruit - you choose.” I’m not saying that is the best translation, but it puts it in an interesting way.

Help me out here: **How can words kill?**

Words can kill a spirit, a dream, kill an attitude or perspective.

What do killing words look like?

Angry, hurtful, slanderous, selfish, bitter, divisive, and demeaning forms of talk.

How can words give life?

They can give life to a spirit or a dream; they can give birth to an attitude or perspective.

What do life giving words look like?

Life-giving words encourage, comfort, make peace, build up, unify, and show love and gratitude.

Our words always have direction. They can either be constructive or destructive. Words have power. Think about your communication in the last week. Has it been more destructive or constructive? Think about a conflict you had with someone. Did you direct your words to be life giving or deadly?

Genesis 1 makes clear God spoke the first words ever spoken. Language is not a human invention and therefore belongs to God. Language is His creation. Our ability to speak sets us apart from the animals and was given to us by God for His glory. Words are a gift calling us to live and speak in a God-focused manner. One of our greatest mistakes in communication is to take words as our own to use as we please. This is what the teenager does as he publicly mocks a friend. This is what a husband does as he criticizes his wife at dinner. This is what friends do as they gossip on the phone. This is what the demanding, critical parent does. They are all stealing God’s glory by treating words as their own creation. People we are glory thieves. We steal God’s glory when we make ourselves mini-kings and forget that we are Ambassadors of Christ.

If you are honest, you have to admit that your relationships have been troubled by words as much as they have been helped. Who can honestly say that all his words are well intentioned and appropriately spoken? Who hasn’t hurt someone with words or used words in a selfish manner? Who has not turned the gift of language into a weapon of anger. The world of talk is a world of trouble. No one articulates this more powerfully than James.

Look at James 3:2. What does James indicate about our words in this verse?

We will never be perfect in our speech; our words are an indicator of our spiritual maturity; our words reveal our need for God's grace.

James calls us to admit that our words are the most powerful and consistent indicators of our need for the grace of Christ. James says that if we were without fault in this area, we would be perfect in every way. So listen to your words. Don't they expose how deep your need is for God's forgiving grace? We stain our relationships with thoughtless and evil words. We are guilty of turning this gift into a weapon. We need forgiveness and we need help.

Now let's turn to Luke 6:45.

So what is the real problem, when our words create conflict?

*The condition of our heart is the problem. Our problem with words is not **primarily** a matter of vocabulary, skill, or timing; it is always the attitude, thoughts, desires, emotions, and purposes that dwell within us.*

Our word problems are heart problems. According to Jesus, who I would say is probably the foremost authority on communication, our words come from the abundance of our hearts.

Let me read to you Luke 6:43-45 - For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

Christ teaches us in this passage that we live out of our hearts. What does the Bible mean by the word "heart"? It means the causal core of your personhood. It is your directional system, your steering wheel. Your behavior isn't caused by the situations and relationships outside of you. It's caused by the way your heart reacts to those things. Word problems aren't vocabulary or technique problems. They are heart problems. Christ uses the example of the tree. Apple trees are apple trees through and through, a principle of organics. We want to think that our problem is outside of us rather than inside of us. But that is a very dangerous heresy, because when you can convince yourself of that, you quit being a seeker after the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. You must come to admit that you are your greatest communication problem. Much of what we do in our attempts to change communication is nothing less than trying to nail apples onto a fruitless tree. You may get it to look authentic and good for a little while, but those apples will soon rot and the tree will be fruitless again next year. It's only when you stand before your Redeemer and are humbly willing to say, regardless of the flawed people you live among, "I am my greatest communication problem," you are heading in a direction of fundamental change.

Have you ever said, “Oops, I didn’t mean to say that”? I have! Often it would be more accurate to say, “I’m sorry I said what I meant”! The real problem with our communication is what we want to say and why we want to say it. The problem actually begins before the words are even spoken. Christ says the heart shapes the what and the why. Therefore, if we hope to transform the way we talk to one another, the heart must change first.

God didn't give us grace to enable us to serve our own kingdom. He gave us grace to enable us to serve his kingdom. The entire law is summarized in a single command: love your neighbor as yourself. Why is that a summary of all that God calls me to? Because it is only when I love God above all else that I'll ever love my neighbor as myself. You don't fix language problems horizontally. You fix them vertically.

So what does it mean to communicate like an ambassador? Does it mean that we quote Scripture incessantly or constantly point out the sins in others? Does it mean we can never talk about sports or the weather? What about the daily need to discuss the details of life - our schedules, responsibilities, problems, and plans - with people?

Here is a practical model of ambassadorial communication. Speaking as an ambassador is not about using biblical words; it's about speaking with a biblical agenda.

Turn with me to Ephesians 4:29-30.

If we want our words to reflect what God wants more than what we want, we should consider three things;

1. Consider the person (“Only what is helpful for building others up”)

Wholesome communication is others-centered. When our words are shaped more by our interests than others', they lose their shelter from difficulty. Paul says we should never say anything that is not helpful for others. Because God is focused on remaking us into His image, we should speak in a way that builds people up as well. We are his ambassadors. We now have a redemptive agenda for talking about everything. We want all of our talk to be redemptively constructive, from the most mundane details to the huge life decisions. As ambassadors, we never want our words to be obstacles to what the King is doing. Our words must always be others-centered.

2. Consider the problem (“According to their needs”)

Ambassadors who are always centered on others also must always be asking, “What is the problem at this moment?” Before we speak, we must think about what others are struggling with and what others most need. Do they need encouragement, comfort, hope, direction, wisdom, courage, rebuke, warning, forgiveness, patience, teaching, correction, thanks, a job description, or something else? Our words are shaped by their needs. An ambassador's words always address the person's true need of the moment.

3. Consider the process (“that it may benefit those who listen”)

This means that we focus on the best way to say what needs to be said.

Ambassadorial communication is not only about the content of our words but the manner in which they are spoken. Often we choose to say the right thing at the wrong time or in the wrong way. But the communication process needs to benefit the person as much as the content of the words. Confronting a teenager five minutes before she leaves for school is not helpful, even if the content is accurate. Rebuking a friend for an offense in front of others is not helpful. Asking your husband to consider how you hurt him as he is trying to get to sleep is not helpful. An ambassador seeks to speak the right thing in the best way.

Will you be Christ’s ambassador to those He places you in relationship with? Paul’s practical model to guide our words ends with something very interesting. “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit.” When you and I speak as mini-kings to get our own way, our words are unhelpful and untimely. Not only do our self-centered, unhelpful and untimely words hurt and grieve other people; they also grieve the Lord.

We must never say that harsh, proud, unloving, ungracious communication is ever OK. It’s not OK. God has invested words with power and Paul says that people can be destroyed by what you say. Sin dehumanizes the people in our lives. It makes them either into vehicles that help me get what I want or obstacles that get in the way of what I want. If they help me get what I want, I speak kindly to them. If they’re in the way, I speak harshly to them.

This kind of talk completely obstructs what He wants to do in and through us in our relationships. Here is where we all must remember that our relationships have been designed as workrooms for redemption, not shelters for human happiness. If we are ever going to give grace when we talk, we need grace to free us from our bondage to ourselves so that our words may be liberated to be used by God.

Our words are significant and if we want God’s will in our relationships (and we should as believers) then we need to seriously consider the words we use and how to speak them. This requires us to submit our will to God’s so that the words that overflow from our hearts are not self-seeking.

We have to take seriously our role as Christ’s ambassador and represent Him in what we say. This means that we should see our relationships as opportunities for God to use us in the life of another.

For the better part of five years, Ashley and Hannah had worked side by side in campus ministry. They loved what they did, and they loved doing it together. But Hannah had been slowly seeking to undermine Ashley's relationship with students. She wanted to be seen as the one who was more capable and in charge. To put it bluntly, she wanted the students to like and admire her more than Ashley. Now Ashley felt things had gotten out of control. Once again her friend had just hurt her, so she made an appointment to meet with Hannah to speak her mind.

Ashley began the meeting accusing Hannah of talking about her negatively to some students. "I can't believe you talk that way behind my back! I have never done that to you, and I never would." Ashley's hurt had boiled over into anger and accusation. Hannah denied everything. "I can't believe you would accuse me of saying those things to other people. I thought our friendship was stronger than that. How come you have held this in for five years? Why didn't you just come to me earlier?" As the two talked, the origin of the problem began to emerge. While talking to someone who did not care for Ashley, Hannah had made a casual comment about how "task-oriented" Ashley could be. She said it was a real pain sometimes to live with her. This remark took on a life of its own when the person repeated it to others with her own embellishments. Eventually the word found its way back to Ashley. By then it sounded as if Hannah saw her friend as a task-oriented demon who just used people to accomplish her ministry goals.

Folks it's inevitable. If we live with other sinners, we will have conflict. AND the closer we are to others, the more potential there is for conflict.

Let's evaluate Hannah and Ashley's conflict. What is the root of the problem? (Don't forget, our problem with words is first a heart problem.)

[Though Hannah's words were subtle, they were the overflow of her heart, which means they were calculated to make Ashley look bad. The desire to look better than Ashley was already in Hannah's heart before the words were spoken. Hannah did not see Ashley's temperament as God's sovereign design but as sin. She did not extend grace to Ashley as God would want her to do, and she did not speak out of Ashley's best interest. Ashley did not look to be Christ's ambassador to Hannah and speak in the best manner. Instead of looking for God's redemptive power, Ashley took on the role of judge and accuser. Ashley did not move toward the relationship as Christ's ambassador but distanced herself and her feelings from Hannah.]

THE BIG QUESTION: What are the sinful desires that lead to conflict in our relationships?

Relationships are costly but so is avoiding them. If we choose to avoid relationships and the conflicts that arise, we will minimize the conflict in our lives, but we will also miss out on God's redemptive work in our lives.

Remember, Father, Son and Spirit were torn up when Jesus died so that we might embrace rather than exclude one another. God wants to make us more like Christ, and he wants to use others to make that happen. We must be willing to face conflict and deal with it in a God-centered way.

Why can't at least one relationship in our lives come with a "no conflict" label attached to it? Some people think that is what marriage is for, and these people are in for a surprise! In reality, marriage is the most likely place for conflict, but close relationships such as marriage are also the most likely places for supernatural change to occur. If we have a problem, conflict is a good one to have. Why? Because conflict is a problem the Bible addresses quite directly. We don't have to be expert Bible scholars to get help here. All we need is a heart that is ready and willing to hear the answer.

Read James 4:1-10.

According to this passage in James, why do we fight with one another?

[our own desires; not getting what we want]

James says the root of conflict is within us. Often our typical response to conflict is to point the finger at the other person. We say things such as, "I did that because you . . ." or "I wouldn't be so angry if you wouldn't . . ." We like to justify our response because the other person has done something annoying, frustrating, or even downright sinful. But James is clear; conflict arises from the desires that battle within us. The word desire that James uses here is a word that would be better translated as "selfish desire." All desires are not wrong, but a selfish desire is.

Conflict broke out between my wife and me in our kitchen. I was putting the dishes away, and she was cooking dinner. We both got into each other's way and then got sarcastic with each other. I said, "I would hate to get in your way while I load the dishwasher!" She replied, "I would hate to get in your way while I cook dinner!" What was going on? I had a desire to accomplish a task and was feeling rather self-righteous about what a sacrificial husband I was. My wife also had a desire to accomplish a task and was feeling self-righteous about what a sacrificial wife and mother she was. Both of our desires quickly turned from good to selfish. I wanted to serve, but it had to be on my terms and on my time schedule. My wife wanted to serve, but she wanted to do it without any distractions. The selfishness showed itself in our self-righteous comments. We both wanted to be recognized for our service, and when that did not happen, we had conflict. We divorced our service from God's glory and the other's good and turned it into self-service.

I want you right now to think of a recent conflict you had with someone. Identify the desire in your heart that led to the conflict by taking a look at the desires listed on your handout. They are not sinful, in and of themselves, until they become selfish desires. They also can be revealed by what we fear because often what we fear is not getting what we want.

- Comfort: I want, must have, and deserve to be comfortable, and you'd better not get in the way of me getting it! (I fear hard work and sacrifice.)
- Pleasure: I want, must have, and deserve to feel good, and you'd better make me feel that way! (I fear pain.)
- Recognition: I want, must have, and deserve to be recognized, or I will be devastated. (I fear being overlooked or unnoticed.)
- Power: I want, must have, and deserve power, and you'd better do what I say! (I fear being told what to do.)
- Control: I want, must have, and deserve control, and you will feel the brunt of my disappointment if you mess up my tidy little universe! (I fear unpredictability and the unknown.)
- Acceptance: I want, must have, and deserve acceptance, and you are responsible for giving it to me. (I fear rejection.)

Here's a few questions to consider:

Do you identify with any of these temptations?

Were one of these desires in your heart during your last conflict?

Which of these desires has become more important to you than your relationship to God?

Which of these desires tends to be the one(s) that most often leads to conflict in your life? It is important that we all are aware of the desires that tend to drive conflict in our lives. It is not appropriate to only blame the other person or to only blame the situation. Being aware of our heart's sinful desires can help diffuse or avoid conflict.

In James 4:4, what does it mean to be a "friend of the world"

It is to make yourself and your selfish desires more important than God's glory.

Ashley and Hannah had made recognition and reputation more important than God's glory and grace. They had made a piece of creation their best friend and primary focus.

Do you find anything encouraging in James 4:4?

We can only be adulterous because we are married to God. He loves us as in a marriage relationship. We are also considered God's friends. Though God is absolutely holy, he still loves us as his bride and accepts us as his friends.

Next time you experience ungodly irritation with a friend, spouse, coworker, or child, ask yourself, "What is more important to me right now than God's glory?"

Consider a married couple where one of the partners has a one-night stand. This person has betrayed the one to whom he is supposed to be most committed. He has shared with another an intimacy that only the spouse can rightly claim. What would you expect the offended spouse to do? Would you expect that person to act as though nothing has happened? What if the offended spouse said, "Oh, that's okay"? Wouldn't you wonder whether that person really cared about the relationship? If the offended person was even slightly invested in the marriage, you would expect to see some jealousy and anger over infidelity, wouldn't you?

The same is true of God. Read James 4:5-6.

When we wander from God, the Spirit he has poured out on us and who now lives in us becomes quite concerned and envious. Another way to translate the words envious or jealous is the word zealous. Like the person who is unfaithful, God is zealous to do whatever it takes to regain the affection of our hearts. He doesn't do this because he needs us; he does this because he loves us. When he pursues us and we humble ourselves and return to him, he pours out even more grace!

God uses the difficulties in relationships to allow us to see what we typically live for besides him. God used Ashley and Hannah in each other's lives to help them grow in repentance and faith.

Who is God using in your life right now? Do you see that your wise, sovereign, and gracious Redeemer was acting on your behalf when he placed this person in your life? If so, you are growing in your ability to engage in conflict in godly ways. Remember, you can't avoid conflict, but it can be a place where amazing growth takes place!

Read James 4:7-10.

Seeing God's redeeming love should lead us to grow in the joy of daily repentance and faith. Seeing, admitting, confessing, and forsaking sin (repentance) in combination with seeing, acknowledging, and adoring Christ (faith) is the only dynamic that can change a war-maker into a peacemaker. We are called to resist Satan's schemes to use parts of creation to entice our still-sinful hearts. We are commanded to humble ourselves and submit ourselves to God. Through humility and crying out to God for help, our hearts will be changed and purified, and our behavior will change as well.

In the kitchen that night, my wife and I experienced God's grace and moved in a different direction after our disagreement. Rather than continuing to point the finger and fight for our own glory, self-protection, and self-love, we confessed our sin, asked for forgiveness, and continued working together. You may be wondering why I have shared such a minor incident. It's because if we don't grow in these little moments, we won't grow when the more difficult times come, such as needing to love an enemy.

To apply what James 4 teaches, we have to begin with relationships built on commitment and love. Within those relationships we can start to form habits that can be practiced later on in tougher moments of conflict.

What then does it look like to engage in godly conflict in the heat of the moment?

- Understand that conflict is one way God works in our lives. In fact, God himself entered into conflict when he humbly came as a man to fight on our behalf against the ravages of sin. He calls us to imitate him as we engage in conflict with others. Godly conflict is an act of compassion.
- Identify what drives ungodly conflict in our lives. What tends to lure our loyalty and affection away from God? Be specific and don't be surprised if each instance of ungodly conflict reveals a different idol, whether it be acceptance, power, control, recognition, pleasure, or being right.
- Recognize our default strategy in conflict. Most of us have a default strategy we use to get what we want. Do we love to fight because we have to be right? Do we avoid conflict because we don't want people to disapprove of us? Do we avoid conflict because we don't like discomfort?
- Engage in specific and intelligent spiritual warfare. When we see what we typically live for and how we try to get it, we can start to grow in repentance and faith. We want to be brutally honest about our sin, but we also want to be ardently hopeful about what Christ has done for us on the cross. We want to remember that because we have the Holy Spirit, we already have the resources available to fight against ungodly conflict.
- Consider the other person.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:14-18.

What different actions does Paul say we should consider when » considering the other person?

warn, encourage, help

What does Paul say we should always do when we consider another person?

be patient, kind, thankful, joyful, and not vengeful

As our hearts are reclaimed by the grace of God, as individuals we should ask questions about what it will look like to engage in godly conflict.

Do I need to pursue someone and confront him?

Do I need to be patient and encourage him?

Do I need to overlook an offense?

What sins and weaknesses in the other person do I need to consider?

Paul says there are different ways to confront, based on what the person needs and what will build him up.

Make a plan to approach the person. If we think patience has run its course and we need to address an issue, approach the person in this way:

- Own whatever personal sin we have brought to the situation. Only do this if you have sin to own—sometimes you will; sometimes you won't. Most of the time we do bring sin into the situation, so don't be afraid to admit where you have not loved well, even if your sin was your response to the other's sin. Our confidence in Christ's righteousness (and not our own) is the only thing that will enable us to do this!
- Agree together that we want God's will. This can take the focus off of ourselves and remind us that God wants to use the conflict for our growth. It also gives us both the same focus as we move forward.
- Name the problem. We may need to address more than one problem. Be specific so that we are both dealing with the same problem. Deal with one problem at a time!
- Explore possible solutions. Stay focused on the problem, and come with a desire to deal with it. Suggest possible alternative solutions, and choose one to implement.
- Implement the agreed upon solution. Be specific and determine what it will look like.
- Evaluate our implementation. Make a commitment to get together again and evaluate how the solution is working. Such a commitment is a form of accountability. It communicates a deep commitment to the relationship.
- If we get stuck and things don't improve, be willing to get outside help. Together we should choose a person we believe will respect both sides of the conflict.

No one ever said that conflict would be fun, but the Christian life is not always fun. That is not the most important thing to God. He is committed to something much bigger. His kingdom plan involves a total restoration of what he has made. He will settle for nothing less in his creation than to see that all things ultimately bring him glory. He will be the center of everything at the end of the age, and when that happens, we will be most satisfied. Right now, he is using conflict to work out this comprehensive plan in us. Take heart, for he is present in our struggles and he is fighting on our behalf!

I wanted give you a quote from C. S. Lewis that he wrote in Mere Christianity:

... we must not be surprised if we are in for a rough time. When a man turns to Christ and seems to be getting on pretty well (in the sense that some of his habits are now corrected), he often feels that it would now be natural if things went fairly smoothly.

When troubles come along—illnesses, money troubles, new kinds of temptation—he is disappointed. These things, he feels, might have been necessary to rouse him and make him repent in his bad old days; but why now? Because God is forcing him on, or up, to a higher level: putting him in situations where he will have to be very much braver, or more patient, or more loving, than he ever dreamed of being before. It seems to us all unnecessary, but that is because we have not yet had the slightest notion of the tremendous thing he means to make of us.

I find I must borrow yet another parable from George MacDonald. Imagine yourself as a house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.

So to wrap this up: Relationships inevitably bring conflict. God bring these into our lives so we need to face the conflict and not avoid it. We need to commit to working through conflict when it arises for the good of the relationship.

God chooses to use conflict to defeat sin in us and make us more like Christ. This should cause us to identify the selfish desires of our hearts that lead to conflict. We then need to accept and confess our sin to the other person.

But here is the cool thing: Christ is present to help us in the midst of conflict and lift us up when we humble ourselves. If we consider the needs of the other person we will be keeping God and His glory first in our lives as well.

Hope For Relationships

Exodus 16: 1: Then they set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the sons of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. 2 The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3 The sons of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the LORD'S hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." 4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction.

Numbers 21: 4 - Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient because of the journey. ⁵ The people spoke against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food."

Ecclesiastes 7: 8 - The end of a matter is better than its beginning; patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit.

Consider these scenarios:

- When they met, they were on top of the world and couldn't seem to get enough of each other. Now, he looked tired. There was no spring left in his step. His slumped shoulders were the testimony of a beaten man. It began when the kids left home. Until then it seemed like they were okay. There probably had been too much conflict between them, but it always seemed to end in forgiveness. He had been looking forward to the simpler life as empty nesters. But they fought constantly. She enjoyed his company less and less and threatened to leave more and more. They even went on a lovely trip together but now it had all fallen apart and he was exhausted and alone since she refused to come to counseling.
- Amy was 29 and she felt like quitting. She had come from a tough home and had always found it hard to open up to people. She learned early to keep her cards close to the vest and dole out personal information very carefully. She had moved to the big city because of a great job opportunity. She had looked for a good church where she could get involved. Grace Church seemed like the perfect place: vibrant biblical preaching, opportunities for fellowship and ministry, and filled with young professionals Amy's age. She discovered a Bible study close to her firm that met every Friday during lunch and met Marisa and before long they were enjoying a close friendship. Things at work were starting to get difficult however. Amy loved her job, but was attracted to her boss which eventually led to a moment of indiscretion that left Amy crushed. What she had done was wrong. She told Marisa everything and Marisa's response was quite helpful. The comfort of this friendship ended when Amy discovered that Marisa shared her dilemma with someone else.

Love's Difficulty:

The problem with relationships is that they all take place right smack-dab in the middle of something, and that something is the story of redemption; God's plan to turn everything in our lives into instruments of Christ like change and growth.

Our life with others is always life in the _____. We are always building community in the tension between God's "already" and "not yet" grace. We have NO more control over the "not yet" than we have had over the "already".

Relationships In The _____

- Our relationships will never work _____

Proverbs 16: 9 - The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps

Biblical Examples: _____

- Our relationships will never _____

Biblical Examples: _____

- Our relationships will ALWAYS _____

Job 5: 7 For man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward.

James 1: 2 – 4 - Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. *ESV*

- Our relationships will ALWAYS _____

_____ For The Middle

Since relationships are always lived out in the middle of some kind of difficulty, good relationships demand character. Our relationships have NOT been designed by God as vehicles for human happiness, but as instruments of redemption. It isn't enough to survive, we've been called to minister!

James 1: 5 – 8 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. *ESV*

The _____ In The Middle

_____ For The Middle

- Christ's _____

- Christ's _____
- Our _____ in Christ

Make it Real:

1. Decide whether you are willing to be an instrument of God's grace in the life of another. Pray for that person(s) daily. Pray that God will grant you what you need to be an instrument of change in their life. Review our previous lessons as you seek to be God's instrument.
2. Decide whether you are willing to allow someone else to be God's instrument of grace in your life. What will you need to be or do to allow that person to help you grow in Christ?
3. Sit down with someone God has placed in your life and for whom you believe God has called you to be an instrument (your spouse, children, coworker, friend). Ask that person how you could best encourage him. What do they tend to forget or doubt about God's presence, promises, or potential?

Forgiveness: Absorbing the Cost

Can you identify with any of these scenarios?

- Grace felt betrayed, and she had been. Her husband John had met someone on the Internet six months ago; they had been having an affair for the past three. Grace found out when she used John's user name to log onto their computer. When she saw the string of instant messages, she was devastated. What was she going to do? She fluctuated between wanting revenge and blaming herself.
- Andy and Melissa had been married for twenty years. Their marriage was strong and growing. But a few days ago Melissa had gotten irritated when Andy came home from work late. She said something sarcastic to him—she couldn't even remember what. But Andy's response was angry, self-justifying, and critical. Days later, the tension was still there. Sin had crept up on them and created a barrier between them.
- Bill loved his children and wanted them to grow up to be godly adults. They were teenagers now, developing a mind of their own. One day, Bill's son Michael came in from the backyard and slammed the door. He was upset that his brother had reneged on a promise to play basketball. Bill immediately got up and yelled at Michael for being so angry. "You have a problem, son, and I'm not going to tolerate it anymore. Your anger is out of control! Go back outside and cool down!" When Michael heard his father yell, he yelled back, turned around, and ran out the door.

C. S. Lewis wrote:

To forgive the incessant provocations of daily life—to keep on forgiving the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son— how can we do it? Only, I think, by remembering where we stand, by meaning our words when we say in our prayers each night, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us." We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse it is to refuse God's mercy for us. There is no hint of exceptions and God means what he says.

The Lord's Prayer commands us to pray, "Forgive our trespasses as we forgive our debtors" right after it instructs us to pray for daily bread. Practicing forgiveness is something we must do daily in the same way we ask for the daily provision of food. It is a part of every day life, not something reserved for life's "big" sins and events, and yet forgiveness seems to be one of the most poorly practiced activities in the Christian community. I've seen this from years of leadership in the church and personal experience.

I had been a Christian for nearly twenty years and married for 5 before I fully understood what it meant to practice forgiveness with my wife! One of the most common problems in relationships with this issue is the giving and receiving of forgiveness. I have known couples who have been married for twenty years, yet neither spouse has truly ever admitted sin and asked for forgiveness. You step back from that and say "How can this be?"

The Bible is the story of a God who forgives, calling those who have been forgiven to be forgiving people. Yet so little of the forgiveness that has been received translates into forgiveness being offered. Folks we need help!

- **Help me out here by giving me a definition for forgiveness.**

- **Tell me what can cause forgiving to be so difficult?**

Feeling hurt; like forgiving them would justify or approve of their sin; forgiveness feels as if you are taking away justice, letting them "off the hook"; they don't deserve it, and so forth.

Let's look at **Matthew 18:21-35**.

So we see here that forgiveness involves canceling a debt.

The metaphor of debt cancelation clearly defines the nature of forgiveness. The merciful king absorbed a huge debt that was owed to him. When we forgive someone, we also cancel a debt. But, more specifically, we make a conscious choice to absorb the cost ourselves. We choose not to make the offender pay for the offense. Also, by forfeiting our right to collect, we make at least three promises.

1. We promise to never bring up the debt as leverage. When we forgive, we are saying that we will not make the offenders pay by reminding them of what they have done (what they owe) in an effort to control them. This does not mean that we can't discuss it and seek to deal with the offense in a redemptive way. This is where the godly conflict we discussed earlier comes into play.
2. We promise to never bring up the offense to others and slander the persons who sinned against us. This does not mean we cannot seek the advice and counsel of others as we work through the issue, but it does mean that we will not slander the person under the guise of getting outside advice. We also will not gossip about what the person has done to us.
3. We promise to not dwell on the offense ourselves. One of the biggest challenges when someone sins against us is to not replay the offense over and over again in our mind. Our forgiveness of others is to be modeled after God's forgiveness of us. - **Psalm 103:12— As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.**

If we break one of these promises then we have not fully forgiven; we have not truly canceled the debt. Our desire to make the person pay outweighs our desire to forgive.

No matter how we spin it, forgiveness is costly; canceling a debt and absorbing the cost is going to hurt. It is this pain that often makes true forgiveness so difficult, but we must be made aware that there is a greater cost to not forgiving!

What is the lesson and warning Jesus makes from the parable?

God is going to treat us the same way we treat others.

An abiding unwillingness to forgive will cost us eternally. It will also make us bitter and unloving people, and we will eventually damage all our relationships.

A failure to forgive will change us. The unmerciful servant, who before the king was the victim of his own negligence, turns into a victimizer by his own unwarranted bitterness and anger. Notice what he does to the other servant: he "seized him by the throat" and had him thrown in jail. It feels so natural to make someone pay, but a sense of justice quickly goes into overdrive and turns into revenge. We may not choke anyone, but we may shut others out of our lives. Bitterness gets its foot in the door, and eventually, if the situation is not addressed and forgiveness is not granted, it takes over. And if we don't practice forgiveness on a daily basis with the little skirmishes, we'll begin to lose the battles, which will eventually cost us the war.

Here is something I'm not sure everyone understands: Forgiveness is an event and a process.

What is the implication of Jesus telling Peter we are to forgive "seventy times seven"?

Forgiveness has no limits. We are always to forgive even when it is the same, endlessly repeated offense. Forgiveness is also something we need to continue to practice even when we are dealing with an offense we have already forgiven.

Always the temptation exists to slip into bitterness some time in the future. Even if we have forgiven for an offense, we will be tempted to think about it the next time we see the person or the next time she sins against us. Without realizing it, we will pile that sin on top of the old sins, making it much more difficult for us to forgive; therefore, we not only need to forgive once but continue to forgive even the same sin.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. In Jeremiah 31:34, God says, "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." This verse, some say, is how we should forgive; that true forgiveness forgets what someone has done to us. This understanding of forgiveness creates at least two problems.

First, it is not realistic. Our minds do not function this way, and our ability to remember is powerful. In the same way, trying to forget a sin someone has committed against us will only encourage us to remember it. Completely erasing our memory is unrealistic.

Second, the passage in Jeremiah does not say that God has amnesia when he looks at you. Our omniscient God does not forget anything! The word remember is not a memory but a promise word, a covenant word. God is promising that when we confess our sins, "I will not treat you as your sins deserve. Instead I will forgive you." This is why forgiveness is both a past and an ongoing process into the future. It is a past promise you keep in the future. When this is done, the memory of small offenses usually dissipates. Larger offenses probably will not.

Grace will never forget about John's affair. Melissa and Andy will always be aware that they have sinned against each other. Michael will remember the times his father was sinfully angry.

But each individual can still practice biblical forgiveness; they can make a promise and remain faithful to that promise over time. If Grace believes she must forget, she may be plagued with doubts about whether she has truly forgiven him, or if she believes she can forgive him once but hold onto the hurt into the future, she will become subtly bitter.

At this point you may be thinking “what if the other person doesn’t repent? Do I still have to forgive them?” To answer that you need to understand that forgiveness has a vertical and a horizontal dimension.

Mark 11:25: says "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you."

We know that this verse is in the context of worship. It relates to our vertical relationship to God. This is the attitude we must always have before God— an attitude of forgiveness toward others. This is nonnegotiable. We do not have the right to withhold forgiveness and harbor bitterness in our hearts.

Now Luke 17:3: says "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him."

This verse considers our horizontal relationship and the act of reconciliation. While we are to have attitudes of forgiveness before the Lord, we can only grant forgiveness to other people if they repent and admit they have sinned against us. Even if they never do this, we are called to maintain an attitude of forgiveness toward the offenders. So practically this means Grace can say to John, "Before the Lord, I am here ready to fully grant you forgiveness and I will not make you pay for what you have done." But she can only grant forgiveness to John and pursue reconciliation if he admits he has sinned and asks for forgiveness. Grace may long for reconciliation between her and John, but ultimately she cannot make reconciliation occur.

So does this mean that forgiveness is conditional?

- What precedes “he repents, forgive him”? – “if”
- God’s Word does not teach universalism...God forgives people when they repent...otherwise the Gospel would be meaningless and the death of Christ would be in vain...

Christians are called to forgive others as God forgave them (Matthew, 6:12, [Ephesians 4:32](#)).

- God forgives conditionally. God only forgives those who repent of their sins and turn in saving faith to Him ([1 John 1:9](#), [John 3:36](#)).
- Likewise, we also should offer forgiveness to all.
- We forgive those who repent. Indeed, we are obliged to forgive ([Luke 17:3-4](#)), knowing that whatever someone has done to offend us pales in comparison to what we have done to offend God ([Matthew 18:32-33](#)).

Now you might ask, "Didn't Jesus forgive those who crucified him, even as he was on the Cross ([Luke 23:33-34](#))?" The short answer to that question is, "no, Jesus did not forgive them." By praying, Jesus demonstrated an attitude of forgiveness. He prayed that those who crucified him would be forgiven in the future; he did not thank God that they were already forgiven. If they had already been forgiven, such a prayer would not have been needed at all.

Christians are called to have an attitude of forgiveness toward all. This leaves no room for bitterness.

Forgiveness does not mean peace at all costs. Matthew chapter 18 instructs us on how to deal with the sin of others. Verses 1—5 teach that life in the kingdom requires humility to confront someone gently about his sin. Verses 6-9 teach that life in the kingdom requires taking sin seriously. We can't sweep it under the rug in our own lives or in the lives of others. Verses 10-14 teach that life in the kingdom involves going after wayward people. Real love demands pursuit. And verses 15-17 teach us how to approach someone who has sinned against us.

Read Matthew 18:15-17.

The Bible never says "Make it easy for someone to sin against you." Instead, it provides a way to deal with sin in redemptive ways. Romans 12:18 says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Paul calls us to strive for peace, but he knows there are limits involved when we pursue someone in love. There are times when love should cover what someone else did to you.

- this is a very dicey topic, but this principle is taught in both the Old and New Testaments...
- 1 Peter 4:8 - Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.

- theoretically, if we confronted one another for every sin we committed, that's about all we'd ever be doing...but we're not talking every minor issue that comes up...

- and you have to be careful here – because if you tend to clam up and ignore problems, you might be running to passages like this when you shouldn't...

So how do we know?...

- but when it's a habit, when it can be detrimental to that person or someone else's spiritual growth or it can defame the church in a public way...then you must follow this step of confronting in love...- if what happened isn't habitual on that other person's part, and no one else stands to be hurt...it may be a candidate for love covering it this time...

Let's look at asking for and granting forgiveness. Help me evaluate the following dialogue between Andy and Melissa.

"Melissa, I am sorry you got so upset when I yelled at you. I hate it when that happens."

"That's OK, Andy. I guess I was just tired after a long day at work."

[Andy actually blames the fight on Melissa! He implied that the problem was not that he yelled at her, but that she was too sensitive about it Melissa responds by accepting the blame for Andy's sin and then excusing her own response. Melissa should not say that it is okay because it is not okay for someone to sin against another person. The great problem here is that no one admits any sin and no one offers forgiveness.]

If a sin truly is committed, it has to be specifically acknowledged by the person who sinned. That person then needs to ask for forgiveness for the specific sin. The offended person then must choose to forgive or not forgive. If this doesn't occur in this way, at some point Melissa is going to become angry with Andy and say that he never admits he is wrong. Andy will likely do the same with Melissa. And they will both be right!

How should this dialogue look?

"Melissa, I am sorry for yelling at you. What I did was wrong. Will you forgive me?"

"Thank you, Andy; yes, I forgive you. Will you forgive me for being sarcastic toward you?"

"Yes, Melissa, I forgive you."

Of course it is possible to use all the right words and not mean what you say. That's hypocrisy and has nothing to do with forgiving. When we practice forgiveness, our words flow from a humble heart that acknowledges how much we ourselves have been forgiven.

Tell me something is there a difference between an apology and asking for forgiveness? What is the difference?

Yes. An apology is appropriate when you have done something by accident. For example, if I accidentally spill a cup of coffee on you, I should say, "I am very sorry I did that" and help you get cleaned up. But if I purposefully threw coffee on you because I was irritated, that is not an accident. That is sin and requires me to name the sin, confess that I was wrong, and ask for forgiveness.

It is one thing to gain clarity on what forgiveness is and what it isn't; it is quite another thing to actually practice it. As we worked through this lesson, we probably thought of people who have sinned against us. We may be troubled by the call to forgive them. We may also have thought of someone we have sinned against. We know we need to ask that person for forgiveness. Either of these scenarios may frighten you. It can be just as frightening to release someone from a debt as it is to admit to our own sin. By God's grace and by remembering the cost Jesus paid that we may be forgiven, it can be done!

The king in the parable who canceled such a tremendous debt is none other than Jesus. He emptied himself and bore our sin on the cross. His desire for reconciliation required absorbing a costly debt that we owed. How can we not do likewise? With God's grace, which he gives us abundantly. Grace can forgive John. Andy and Melissa will practice forgiveness in their marriage day after day. Michael will be able to forgive his dad for his angry outburst. John will be able to confess his sin and ask Grace for forgiveness.

What about you? Will you focus on the debt that is owed you or will you focus on the debt that has been paid for you?

We need to remember the debt Jesus absorbed on our behalf so that we might be forgiven. Absorbing the debt is difficult so we need to ask God for the grace to truly forgive and seek forgiveness.

We must fully forgive others by forfeiting our right to collect what is owed us by not bringing up the debt to the offender, to others, or to ourselves. This requires we continue to forgive the offender each time we remember the sin against us.

It also means I must seek forgiveness for my offenses by specifically naming my sin and asking for forgiveness not just saying sorry.

CJ Mahaney says “When I become bitter or unforgiving toward others, I’m assuming that the sins of others are more serious than my sins against God. The cross transforms my perspective. Through the cross I realize that no sin committed against me will ever be as serious as the innumerable sins I’ve committed against God. When we understand how much God has forgiven us, it’s not difficult to forgive others.”

Good to Great

What we know, what we believe, and what we say we believe do not automatically make successful relationships. What makes words powerful is the action that flows from them. What makes correct thinking about God powerful and meaningful is the life that emerges daily from that knowledge. We have talked a lot about thinking the correct way about our relationships, but that understanding is on display not in our words or our thinking but in how we actually treat others!

I grew up hearing my parents say things like “do as I say not as I do.” I’m sure you all have heard that before too. I know I’ve even wanted to say that to my children. What sticks out to me though is how most of the time I ended up emulating how they behaved rather than what they told me. I did or said what I saw and heard. This truth is the same in our other relationships too. I can tell my small group all I want that they should be fellowshiping and coming along side one another to encourage and build up, but if I’m not doing that then I’m just giving lip service.

If I don’t heed my own advice or I don’t live it out I start to be like that resounding gong we read about in scripture. All talk with no depth or substance. We are called to be doing for one another. Our actions are not what saves us or sanctifies us, but if our actions don’t follow our words, if we talk the talk, but don’t walk the walk, then we become an example of tree that bears bad fruit.

The Bible has many passages on what we should be doing for "one another" (often called the one-another passages). I’ve included that list in your handout.

Would anyone be willing to tell of a time someone has exemplified one of these “one another” passages in your life?

Read Mark 10:35-45.

What leads to the conflict among the disciples?

Ultimately they are all being self-focused.

What truth does Jesus teach them?

The pathway to greatness is found in humility and focusing on and serving others.

When we think about our relationships, how many of them ultimately revolve around making sure our concerns are heard and our self-defined "needs" are met? Let’s just start with those we love the most. Can I be honest with you? I am married and have three children, and most of the time I am committed to thinking about how they can make my life more fulfilling. I know this is true because of how easily I get irritated when I have to give up personal comfort to serve them. Now this is with people I love; I haven't even begun to think about the difficult people. And I will not even bring up my enemies! Do you see this in yourself? This is the first step to becoming a servant and being great in our relationships.

We must see how much of a servant we aren't before we can start to become one. The disciples had to learn this, too, which means we are in good company. Twelve normal men had spent several years in Jesus' presence, and yet they were so thickheaded that they were contending for power and position. It was a lesson Jesus felt was important enough to stress even as he prepared for his death. John records for us in John 13 how Jesus intends for us to follow him. Through words and actions, Jesus gives his disciples instructions that will help them change the world.

Read John 13:1-17.

From this passage what do we learn about what it means to be a leader and Christ's disciple?

It means we are required to serve others; when we choose not to serve others but ourselves instead, we place ourselves above Christ—a servant is not above his master.

Circumstances do not determine whether we serve. One of our most common excuses for not being more loving and helpful is our circumstances. When we are weighed down with difficulties, what is the first thing we want to do? We don't want to do anything! We want others to do things for us. We want to be served, not serve. A common excuse I hear often is "I'm so busy." People can be busy and when someone tells me that please don't think that I quickly judge and say they aren't. But, I have counseled young men who have given me that excuse. Usually my first question is how much TV did they watch or how much time did they spend on the computer/internet/facebook. When we get our priorities out of whack our serving gets out of place as well. Again, I only have to look as far back as yesterday for examples.

When my children press in on me the second I arrive from work, I am suddenly reminded of all my responsibilities. Don't they understand I have a job with many things to think about? Why do they insist that I look at what they've built immediately? Don't they see that I have more important things to be concerned about than their play things? These are the thoughts that race through my mind. Soon I feel convicted about my impatience and try to rationalize it. I would be more patient if I didn't have to worry about my bills and getting my work done. I would be a kinder, gentler father if they would be less aggressive and more obedient and respectful.

In other words, if my circumstances were easier, I would be a better servant. If I could take care of my cares, I would be more caring.

In fact, my children came into the room while I was working on this lesson vying for my attention and I was tempted to get irritable -again!

We are in the circumstances we're in, because God sees fit for us to be in them. He also is using them to sanctify us. He is molding us more and more into Christlikeness. Our small group was talking this week about God's Sovereignty. We were discussing this very subject. (talk about the providence of God!) No matter what our circumstances we are commanded to be holy as He is holy. My response in my mind to my children excited to see me and be with me was definitely not a holy response. I am ashamed to admit my sinful response. It's easy to say I'm stressed or concerned, but those don't even compare to the place Christ was in in John 13.

Think about this: what are Jesus circumstances in John 13?

Jesus knows the hour had come for Him to die on the cross for self-centered sinners. He knows the wrath of a just and holy God will soon fall on him. he knows a friend will betray him.

Yet what does Jesus do?

He serves his disciples. He does for his disciples what they should have done for him.

It would have been very tempting for Jesus to say, "Don't you guys know what is about to happen to me? Get a grip and comfort me!" Yet he says nothing about what is about to occur; he just serves, without self-pity.

This kind of serving is not normal—it is miraculous. When our circumstances are difficult, it feels like a miraculous act to serve someone else; but that is what Jesus did, and he calls his followers to do the same. We should never minimize the humble service of one person to another; it is a sign of God's grace at work in a person's life.

Someone's worthiness does not determine whether we serve. Jesus not only serves in the midst of his great crisis; he serves the very ones who don't deserve to be served. As Jesus' eyes scanned the room, I wonder what he was thinking. He sees Judas, who would soon betray him and hand him over to the Roman authorities. He sees Peter, who would soon deny that he was ever associated with Jesus. The other ten disciples would use the feet he is washing to run for cover when Jesus needs them most. And yet Jesus gets down on his knees and serves them all.

And folks this is no small deal what he is doing. Washing dirty feet! This isn't telling someone good job when you feel like you should get the praise. This isn't making a meal for a single mother who just gave birth. This isn't taking out the trash when it was someone elses job. This is getting down and dirty and quite intimate when He is about to die!

Think of all the areas of worthiness we consider when we are faced with serving someone. We consider whether they will properly appreciate what we have done, we consider past times when we were burned, we consider whether they will expect more, we consider whether they have done anything for us in the past or we consider how they have hurt us in the past, we consider their sin and their selfishness, or we consider

how critical they might be. All of these considerations are weighing how worthy we feel the other person is. But Jesus calls us to serve and move into people's lives even when we risk being vulnerable, being unappreciated, being pushed and annoyed, unrecognized, even when it means serving the selfish and weak. Who tempts us to give up? Who in our lives has maxed out their compassion quotas? Jesus is calling us to serve those people. Think about the one or two people who have most significantly impacted your life for good. Weren't humility and servanthood a large part of their influence?

Our position does not determine whether we serve. Jesus is God; Creator and King of the universe (see John 13:1, 3), yet he chose to serve and to humble himself by washing his disciples' feet.

Tell me how Jesus' example and definition of greatness is very different from the examples and definitions the world gives us?

The world tells us we are great when we climb the ladder of power and influence. That happiness and fulfillment come from being served. Jesus' example is quite the opposite - that purpose and fulfillment come from serving others; that we are great when we humble ourselves.

I can't think of any relationship where this notion is more frequently put to the test than with my children. The Bible clearly says that parents have authority over their children. Children are not to run the household; parents are. It would seem to follow that children are to serve the parents and not the other way around. Yet, at the same time, the Bible redeems authority from sinful patterns by humbling parents and calling them to use their authority for the benefit of the children. Where in your life do you have the privilege to serve people who are "under" you?

We stated earlier that serving in the midst of difficult circumstances, serving and overcoming our own self-centered nature, and serving those who are unworthy require a miracle. Fortunately, it is a miracle God desires to grant to each one of us.

The first part of the miracle happened when Jesus went to the cross on our behalf so that we might be washed and our sins forgiven so that the Holy Spirit could dwell within us. This is what Jesus meant when he said to Peter, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." Accepting God's grace in his gift of salvation is the first step to being able to show grace and to serve others.

The second part of the miracle is that by the Spirit we have the power to show grace and to serve others. This requires daily cleansing from God. It is what Jesus meant when he said to Peter, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet." Jesus means we are cleansed and justified by his death on the cross, but we still need daily cleansing and sanctification. We can't live only on past grace; we need present grace.

The moment we move out into the world we face trouble and temptation. We may become involved in conflict and persecution. There will be times when we want to quit and wonder if it is worth following Jesus. At these moments, we need the work of the Spirit to remind us of our own sin and remind us of the grace available to us.

The service Jesus rendered for us in his life, death, and resurrection is not only for forgiveness of sins or for a fixture in heaven; it is also for the daily power to change in the present. We are not just promised life after death but also life before death!

So whoever wants to be great must become a servant. We have the perfect model of this in Jesus.

Serving others is never optional if we claim Jesus as our Lord. We need to see ourselves as servants in relation to others. We need to be reminded of our need for grace and forgiveness so we can offer grace and forgiveness to others. And the result of that will be made manifest in our serving others by loving, accepting, honoring, carrying their burdens, and bearing with them.

One way to help give us the right perspective and mindset is to be mindful of how Christ served us so we can serve others. We must look for opportunities to serve instead of looking for excuses not to serve.

Time and Money

John Piper writes, "God is calling us to be conduits of his grace, not cul-de-sacs."

What does John Piper mean?

A conduit joins a source to another place. It allows for and facilitates a flow of something. A cul-de-sac is an ending place. God's grace and blessings are not meant to end with us but are intended to flow through us into the lives of others.

God loves people, and if we are to truly love God, we need to love people too. God treasures people and gave up his Son for our behalf: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). Our relationships should imitate this kind of sacrificial love.

One way to evaluate and discover what we treasure is to look at our schedules and our checkbooks. How we relate to time and money says a lot about our relationship to God and how we view other people. Ephesians 4:28 and 5:16 say important things about money and time. And interestingly, Paul slips these comments in amid teaching on relationships.

Read Ephesians 4:25-32.

In this passage, Paul gives commands to the believer along with a reason or purpose for the command. So in verse 25, why should we speak truthfully? Because we are members of one body. In verse 27, what is the purpose behind not sinning in our anger? So we do not give the devil a foothold.

According to Paul in verse 28, what are the purposes for working?

(1) so that we do not need to steal, (2) so we can share with those in need.

What is your primary purpose for working and making money? Is it to provide for yourself and your family? To live securely? To be able to retire? To be able to be comfortable? Or can you truly say, "I primarily work so I can share what I make with others"? What do your investments say about what you think about yourself and others? Is there any indication that you are investing your money in the things God says are important? Or are you just building bigger and better barns that only serve your purposes?

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-15.

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul makes two comparisons that provide clear examples of how to view our giving. He outlines the giving of the Macedonians and the giving of Jesus. Let's take a look at these.

1. The Giving of the Macedonians

As we examine the giving of the Macedonians, I want you to compare their relationship to money to your own.

Their giving encouraged unity. The Macedonians were Gentiles, and they owed their spiritual lives to Jewish Christians. Their giving reflected this.

Romans 15:25-27 says “*At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.*” Here is a tangible expression of unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians. This is remarkable given the deep rift that existed between Jew and Gentile even in the early days of the church. Our experience of reconciling grace is expressed every time we pool our resources for the kingdom of God.

Their giving was a supernatural work of the Spirit. Second Corinthians 8:1 says that their giving was a sign of God's work in them. This kind of giving does not occur naturally. Their unified worship of the living God produced giving that was surprising and even shocking. Do you give as an expression of worship? Our giving should be an overflow of the work God is doing in our heart. If we were truly an open book people should be able to see that we believers worship God in all aspects of our lives. One place that should show up is in your checkbook. The further along we are in our sanctification process the more we see our money as not “ours” but God’s. What is so difficult for us today in our society is this world we live in. We are inundated with materialism. We are drawn to money and it is only by the supernatural work of the holy spirit in our hearts that we are not consumed by it.

Their giving was surprising. The Macedonians gave contrary to the way the world gives. They gave not out of abundance but rather despite their own need. In the midst of their poverty and persecution, they exhibited generosity and joy. This is an astounding contrast. The average person gives once he has enough to support his chosen lifestyle. If someone examined your giving, would he/she be surprised at how much you give?

Their giving was sacrificial. The Macedonians gave far more than they could afford (v. 3). Here we see the Macedonians making a difficult situation even more difficult for themselves by giving more. Most of us in this situation would limit our giving. Not the Macedonians! This just seems so counterintuitive to us.

Their giving was spontaneous. The Macedonians pleaded for the privilege of sharing and giving (v. 4). This was not a budgeted item but a sincere desire to give. Here is a poverty-stricken congregation pleading for the opportunity to give to their hurting Jewish brothers. Notice who is doing the begging here: It is not Paul! Paul is not coercing them

with guilt. Do you beg to give away your resources? Are you working passionately to find ways to bless others?

Their giving was an act of submission. The Macedonians weren't submitting to Paul, the great apostle, or his visionary ministry in their giving. Instead, first they submitted to God and then to their brothers and sisters in Christ in Jerusalem. Their giving was caught up in their relationship to God and their solidarity with their spiritual family. Have you submitted your finances to God's will and trusted in his provision?

Now let's look at the giving of Jesus -

Paul uses the Macedonians as an example of generosity as well as Jesus himself who "though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (v. 9) The motivation to give generously should be more than a moral code and more than the guideline of a tithe; it should flow from a gratitude to Jesus who gave all he had for us. Do you remember your past spiritual poverty and the riches you have been given?

God intends for us to be a conduit of his grace, which includes his grace of material blessing. Examine your relationship to money. What does it tell you about your relationship to God? What does it reveal about what you think is most important?

Let's switch gears a bit. Apart from sleeping, how do we spend most of our time? Like money, our use of time is a window into our souls. It reveals to what degree we are being transformed by the grace of Christ and how much of a conduit we are of that grace.

Read Ephesians 5:15-21.

Like his comments about money in Ephesians 4:28, Paul connects his comments about time to our relationships with other Christians and the world.

What do you think Paul means when he writes, "making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil"?

The King James translates the phrase "making the most of every opportunity" as "redeeming the time." The Greek word for time used here is not *chronos*, which refers to the passing of time in hours, months, and years. Instead, *kairos* is used, which the Bible uses to refer to the time between Jesus' first and second comings. This is a time of unique opportunity for us to display the grace of Christ to others. One day this season will come to an end when Christ returns in power and glory. Thus a more awkward but appropriate rendering of this verse would be, "As you go about your life in this 'in-between time' use it to its fullest to display the grace of Christ to others." In light of this knowledge, let's look at how we are to understand what this verse is asking of us.

- It is not calling for frenetic activity. This passage is not encouraging activity that overloads our schedules with church events and obligations. Nor does it ask us to turn normal relational moments into abnormal witnessing encounters. In fact, this kind of

behavior may hinder us from living wisely. Using our time wisely may include formal ministry opportunities such as a missions trip, teaching a Sunday school class, or working in the nursery, but the call here is not so much about specific activities as it is about a lifestyle committed to God's purposes, encompassing all the details of daily life.

- It means that we see our lives in light of our various callings. This passage is saying, "Make the most of every area in which God has placed you." Are you single, married, retired, parent, child, friend, employer, employee, student, grandparent? These are all callings and seasons of life, and we are to see them as opportunities to display the grace of Christ. Our tendency is to live with a get-through-this-season mentality.
- We think, If I can just get through this busy season of life, then I will be okay. If I can just get through the diaper phase, . . . (or the elementary years or the teenage years). Or, Once I get married, . . . Or, Once I have children If we are not careful, we will wish our lives away and miss many opportunities to love and serve others. God wants to use the daily struggles of life as critical moments of redemptive opportunity rather than hindrances or distractions.
- It means that we are to seize the little moments of life. Did you know that 95 percent of our life is lived in the mundane? For example, suppose a husband and wife are upset with each other. Will they turn toward each other, or will they remain angry? This is a mammoth redemptive moment—huge! Consider how many of these moments we miss every day. Imagine if this couple misses thousands of these over the course of their marriage. Where will their marriage be in twenty years? Imagine if, instead, they took advantage of these times. Can you see the difference this would make?
- We must see the context in which these things take place. Paul says, "Because the days are evil." We live in war zones. We get out of bed every morning, and there are battles raging for our souls, our lives, our friendships, and our marriages. We can't afford to waste these moments. The war is won in the little skirmishes that take place throughout our lives. "Wake up!" Paul says. "You are at war."

God lavishes his resources on us so that we might participate and use those resources in his kingdom work. Do other people share in God's blessings to you, or do you hoard them all for yourself? We are called to love God and to use his blessings to love others. But sadly, we often use other people to get the things we love.

When I got married, I did what every other groom does. I repeated vows to my wife that said I would love her sacrificially all the days of my life. Who was I kidding? I look back and see how little I understood what I promised. What I was really thinking to a large degree was. This is great! I love me, and now you are going to love me! My love was quite shallow. It only took a few days of marriage to figure that out! God had plans to use my wife and children to show me just how shallow my love was and to help it deepen as I saw how much I needed to grow. Seeing this caused me to depend on God and his grace all the more.

Not a day passes that I don't struggle with the way I use my time and money with my family. I told you this last week, I struggle to hold my time loosely when I don't want to be disturbed. These daily reminders reveal a heart still in need of a major overhaul. The only thing capable of penetrating the hardness of my heart is the gracious redemption that Father, Son, and Spirit have accomplished on my behalf. If my heart is going to be changed, it has to remain immersed in his grace.

Think about a steak. Thanks to the Hochstetlers we've been introduced to buying a cow with a few people. We have it slaughtered and then we get to fill up our freezer full of meat. I have three young boys; though they aren't in highschool yet, (I know it will get worse) they still eat a lot! My wife on occasion pulls out the steaks. She makes these amazing marinades. So if you want your steak to be tender and flavorful, you will put it in a marinade for a while before you place it on the grill.

If we are going to love others with our time and money, something similar needs to happen with our hearts. Our hearts are hard and full of gristle; the way to soften them is to let them soak in God's redemptive grace in Christ. This is the only thing powerful enough to loosen our grip on money and time and produce real change. The gospel reminds us that everything we have is from God.

Going back to our illustration at the beginning being a conduit of God's grace will require commitment and submission to God. Here's what I would like you to do this week. Make a list of commitments you could make as a result of this lesson. Let me give you a few examples: Commit to spending time/ more time with God each morning; commit to increasing your tithe; commit to giving beyond what you feel you could give; commit to spending a set amount of time with your spouse/children each day; commit to adding a missionary or other charity to your yearly spending; commit to praying for our missionaries/pastors/elders/deacons; commit to spending time serving in our church in some way; commit to discipling someone in their walk; start a bible study; etc.

Pray, and then if you are married, compare your list with your spouse's list. As a couple, select the ones you really feel God is calling you to commit to.

Folks our time and money are given to us by God's grace and God lavishes his resources and grace on us so that we may share them in the lives of others.

God expects me to use what he has given me in the lives of others, not to hold back for any reason. This means that we need to spend quality time with God connecting with the source of grace to be able to give grace to others. As we grow in this grace we are to give grace to others through the use of my time and money.

We also need to give generously of our time and money to others. I need to see others as God does—as a treasure worth sacrificing for and investing in.

Rest in God's Sovereignty

God is the author of your story. You see, you rest even when you are confused. You can rest even when life doesn't make sense. You can rest even when you do not know what to do. You can rest even in moments of difficulty.

Let me tell you a story. He was a gifted politician and king. Part of one of the most amazing political/governmental stories you could ever imagine. His story was really quite amazing. He had grown up on a farm and had spent most of his boyhood years with animals. Not really what you'd think was the preparation for a dynamic political career. He never dreamed as a boy that he would be where he finally ended up; the leader of one of the ruling countries of the world. It just didn't seem that's where he was going, but that amazing story, in the shock of a moment, turned very, very ugly.

There was report of a coup, and to make it worse, the person who was determined to overthrow him and to take his position was his son. It seemed impossible to believe, but it was true. And to add to the shock of it all, the word was that the hearts of the people of his country, which he had lead so faithfully, were beginning to turn from him and were growingly supportive of his son.

There was only one thing to do. Run! And run he did. He was able to escape with a few of his closest confidants and advisors. There was nowhere to be safe, few people he could trust. So he found himself with a small band of faithful men, hiding out in a cave. Think how blown your mind would be. You've lost everything, and your son was your number one enemy. What in the world would you do?

I don't know if you realize it or not but that heartbreaking story of political intrigue and violence is actually a very familiar Biblical story. It's the story of David and Absalom. You probably can't read many stories in the Bible or anywhere else, that are filled with more drama and angst, with joy and sorrow, pain and disaster, than this story. It was a political and familial nightmare!

And it's one of those sad stories that we hear about in life that you just know wasn't going to have a good ending. You could just sense that, as you read the story, it was going someplace bad. And it did. David's son Absalom was killed in the middle of the coup. And in the story, you read the unbelievable grief of a broken father.

As David gets the report of his son's death, he crumbles in emotion and cries, "Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom! Oh, Absalom!"

Now think about it. Before that happened, and David was in the cave, what would you have been doing as you were hiding there? What would you have been thinking as you were facing the evil that your son was going to do against you? What would you have tried to say to the people who were around you, who were, sort of, your loyal followers?

Maybe the question we should be asking is: When your heart is broken, what do you think? What do you do? Where do you run for rest when you're having trouble facing the

things that are in your life? What are your patterns? How do you deal with things? When you're hurting, do you numb yourself with far too much television? Do you go out and spend far too much, hoping that somehow physical possessions will somehow bring you joy? Do you eat too much, asking the temporary pleasures of food to comfort your heart?

You see, if you think about it, you are always dealing with things, as David did. No, not something this political. No, not something this dramatic. But life in a fallen world has sorrow with it. Life in a fallen world brings difficulty with it. And so, there's some way, somehow, something, that we're dealing with all the time; we have some kind of patterns when we're dealing with the hardships of life in this broken, fallen world.

Maybe you are asking food to bring you comfort. Or maybe you're trying to keep yourself busy so you simply don't have time to think. Somehow, some way, you're dealing with what's on your plate. When you're up against it, where do you run for rest?

Think with me for a minute about how little of your life you actually control. You did not choose where you would be born. Yet the location of your birth shaped the entire story of your life. This impresses me every time I travel abroad. What would my life have been like if I had been born on the violent streets of Belfast? Or in the filth of a ghetto in New Delhi? Or in a tiny flat in Moscow? Or in an apartment in Seoul?

You did not choose the family you were born into, but how could any decision be more important than that?! You did not choose what period of history you would be born in, yet it has shaped everything you have experienced. Imagine what your life would have been like if you had been born into a peasant family in Medieval Europe, or born on a wagon train heading for attractive land in the pioneer Northwest. Or born to the family of an ancient Chinese craftsman; or if you'd been a slave in Pharaoh's Egypt.

You did not choose the world events that would take place around you, but they've shaped your life nonetheless. When I'm not flying for my job and I have the opportunity to fly on a commercial plane, almost every time I board a plane, I think about how a group of Middle Eastern men plotted for months about how to hijack planes and fly them into buildings. I did not know these men; I was not the target of their attack, yet my sense of the world, my personal security, my habits of travel, have been shaped by what they did.

I just saw on the television two days ago about a man who's plans for a suicide bombing in our nations capitol building were thankfully thwarted by the FBI. I know that since 9/11 I think more about being killed than I ever did before that.

You do not control the progress of science and knowledge, but your life has been shaped by it. You will live longer because of Penicillin, Aspirin, sterilization, thermometers, X-rays, and MRIs. We all need to be humbled by the vast number of things that have impacted our lives over which we made no decision and exercised no control.

My life is a perfect example. I did not plan to be born in Homestead, FL on an Air Force base to a man and a woman who were just teenagers. I did not plan to have my parents take me to church faithfully Sunday after Sunday. I did not plan how many siblings I would have, that I would be my parents only son or that I would have three younger sisters. I did not plan where I would be in the order of my siblings. I did not plan what my personal gifts would be. I did not plan what the culture of my home would be like or the blessings and struggles that I would encounter there.

It's an amazing and humbling thing to admit, but almost all of my life was not my plan. The high school I attended? I didn't know that I was going to be there. The college that I attended? I didn't know that's where I was going to end up. The woman that I married? I didn't know that I was going to marry her. The fact that a company closing its doors forever would lead me to learn to fly? I didn't know that that was going to happen. None of those things were part of my plan.

You see, one of the most comforting things in the Bible, as we face how our lives haven't work according to our plan, is this amazing truth that you and I aren't responsible for writing our own stories. The Bible is very clear about one essential, life-shaping fact: God is the Author of your story.

You see, you can rest even when you are confused. You can rest even when life doesn't make sense. You can rest even when you do not know what to do. You can rest even when you are facing problems that you do not know how to solve. You can rest even in moments of difficulty. Maybe you're thinking, Why? How? How can I rest when life isn't making any sense?

Here's where I think that we make our mistake. I think that we become convinced that we will only be able to rest when we fully understand what's going on in our lives; that rest is the product, the result, of understanding. And the Bible actually doesn't teach us that! The Bible actually teaches that real rest is found, not in understanding, because you will never understand everything in your life. Real rest is only ever found in placing your trust in the Person Who is carefully and wisely writing your story for you!

Listen to what Paul says in Acts 17:24-26.

Speaking of God, he says, He determines the times set for them, and the exact places they will live. What do these words actually mean? He determines the times set for them, and the exact places they will live.

What does it mean? Well, it means that your life is never out of control. Sure, it will be out of your control a lot of the time, but it's never out of Ultimate Control, because according to Paul, God is in intimate personal contact and control of the specific details of your life. He doesn't say He generally determines details. Like in broad strokes, but in very specific details. Paul says that He determines the exact places where we all live. Your address. Your city. Your time of life. It's all an expression of God's plan! And why is

this so comforting? Because Paul goes on to say that God involves Himself with the details of our lives so that He's always near; in order that, at any moment, we could reach out to Him, because He's not far from each one of us.

You see, even though I am regularly surprised and regularly confused, even though it would be often honest for me to say, "I don't have a clue what's going on!," God is never surprised! And God is never confused. He always has His hands on the controls! And He is the Ultimate Source of wisdom, of love, and of power. Let me say it again: Real rest is not found in understanding, because you will never come to understand everything in your life. Real rest is found in trusting the Person Who is in control of the details of your life.

You see, you and I do not have to crumble when we do not understand. We do not have to be paralyzed with fear because our plans have blown up in our face. We do not have to dread what the next day will bring. We don't have to panic because life is bigger than us and confusing to us. You see, you and I can rest, really rest, because God is wise, loving, and powerful, and He is in moment by moment control of every detail of our lives!

We human beings are made to need rest. That's why God created a Sabbath of rest even in His creation plan. So, it's worth asking the question; where are we looking for rest? Have you come to understand that ultimate personal rest, that inner sense of well-being, that calm and security that allows you to go about your day in peace, and do what you were meant to do? It just doesn't come from analysis, from investigation, from explanations and understanding.

If you were able to go to college and get a PhD in Everyday Life, there would still be things that confuse you. There would still be things that you wouldn't understand. If you're a wife, your husband will still have reactions that surprise you. If you're a parent, your kids will still respond in ways that surprise you. If you're paying attention, it's really clear: you're not the author of your own story. There are things that happen in your individual life and things that happen in the wider world that you are required to live in the middle of, that you are required to deal with, that you didn't plan, and that you don't control. And for all of your desire to make sense of it all, and for all of the ability that God has given your brain to be rational and to think and to figure things out; that function is very good, but it's not exhaustive.

What does all of this mean? Does it mean a life of panic, dread, fear, and anxiety? No, what it means is that real lasting rest, in the middle of life, in this broken world, is only found in a Person: the LORD.

Remember David? Remember him in that cave? Remember how he's hiding from his son? Well, as he was doing that, he said these amazing words, it's just amazing for a father in this horrible, emotional situation to say this, but this is what he says: In peace, I will both lay me down and sleep, because You alone, O LORD, make me to dwell in safety.

Think about what David is saying. Think about how amazing these words are! David is saying this: I am able to lay down and rest even in this cave, because the God Who is in charge of my life is just as much with me here as He was in that palace. You see, David is able to rest because he understands that rest can only be found when you're resting in the LORD. He is in charge. He is writing your story. He is near. He is wise. He is loving, and He is very good.

Now, here's the bottom line: if you're a human being, you're a "rest junkie." You're after rest. You don't like being anxious. You don't like being afraid. You don't like feeling confused. You don't stand in the middle of your day and say, "My life is a complete mess, and that's OK with me." Nobody does that. There's somewhere that you're going for rest. There is something that you're looking to, to provide that inner sense of well-being. Where are you going for rest? Where are you going for that inner sense of well-being?

Are you anxious? Are you fearful? Do you ever become powerfully aware of how little you actually control in your life? Are you able to stare difficulty in the face and actually have peace inside? Are you able to be in the middle of the unexpected and rest? Maybe you're living through anxious days and sleepless nights. Here's what you've got know: You will never completely, totally, figure your life out. You'll never be able to control all the things that you would like to control. Your life will always be in some way, a little bit out of your control.

But you don't need to panic. You don't need to give way to fear. You don't need to numb yourself with things that will hurt you, because there is One that loves you and is in control of the details of your life. You can rest because He knows exactly what He's doing, even when you don't.

Moving Out

So over these 13 weeks we've been packing in these truths. We've covered a lot of ground and discussed how God wants to see us in our relationships and what we need to be getting out or through them. So now its time to move out. We need to take what we've learned and use it. Apply this to our lives. I truly hope 1. that you've learned somethings about yourselves and your relationships and 2. that you've already been applying them to those relationships.

Let's look over our lessons from the last few months and just review a bit:

On our first lesson together we were confronted with our relationships and the nature of God. This is where we learned why we are even in relationships in the first place. We saw that God created us to be in relationships. Because God himself is a community, he created and intends for us to live in community so that we may be a reflection of him. Isn't it true that in this Genesis 3 world relationships are hard. They are difficult. People let us down. Parents disappoint. Friends betray. Colleagues undermine. Children disobey. Spouses hurt. And through all of this God is saying "I've got you right where I want you" And he's saying that because he wants us to be more like him. These hard times and these struggles refine us. They are like spot lights on our hearts. Revealing our sin and pointing out where we need to change and grow. Without these hard times and God's word we would be content to be just as we are.

Our second lesson was - Relationships the problem and the solution. These hard, difficult, stretching times don't materialize from nothing. They don't just appear. Our challenges are a making of our own. Our problems in relationships have everything to do with sin inside us, and our potential to overcome problems has everything to do with Christ. Folks we are the problem. The sin that so easily entangles is where the problem lies. It's in our hearts

Remember James 4:1-4 - *What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*

So we see that our problem lies within our heart and we are born this way. Lady Gaga is right, we are born this way. But we have one thing as far as I can tell that she doesn't. That's hope. We have the answer key.

We see the solution to our problem further on in that chapter, James 4:5-12 - *Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw*

near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

Our third lesson was Relationships God's workshop. This is where it becomes apparent that God uses relationships to lead us into growth and sanctification. This is where the real work happens and we start to see results. I was a perfect person before I was married! I love myself so I followed 1 Corinthians 13 to the "T". I was patient with myself, I was kind to myself, I didn't envy myself, I wasn't rude to myself. Then I got married - and boy did I see my faults. Right?! Conflict happened that never happened when I was alone. And this is where I started to grow and my wife and children became catalysts for my sanctification. This is true of all of us. Our underlying agenda is ourselves and we need others to help us see that.

Our fourth lesson was a video from Paul Tripp on worship. Excellent stuff. Good relationships are built on remembering two things: 1. Who we are in God's eyes and 2. Worshipping God for who he is. We do what we do because we want what we want. And we want what we want because of what we have placed in a position of worship. We were made as worshippers. We are always worshipping something. It's either Christ or it isn't.

Next was Communication. Whoa Nelly! What and how I communicate is essential to whether my relationships are good or bad. We are Christ's ambassadors here on earth and we represent him every time we speak. Our communication needs to always be pointing to Christ. If it is self serving then it is not glorifying God.

We went on to discuss conflict. I'm sure no one here has had that so let's just skip it. Actually, it isn't possible to be in a relationship for a period of time without some sort of conflict. Relationships inevitably bring conflict. But we also can grow from it. What we do with that conflict and how we respond to it will decide whether we persevere with Christ's help or we tumble into a shambled relationship.

That led us to forgiveness. We had a lively conversation about that topic. Forgiveness is foundational to our faith. As a community of forgiven people, we are called to practice forgiveness. The correct response to conflict is forgiveness. Forgiveness being requested and forgiveness being granted. And as forgiven people we can't withhold forgiveness. We are to forgive so that reconciliation can happen. We see in the Lord's prayer, Christ shows believers that they are to be asking for forgiveness. We are ultimately forgiven, but we still have indwelling sin that we won't be fully free from this side of glory. Forgiveness is the oil within our relationships that helps the wheels to turn smoothly and keeps the inevitable friction to a minimum.

Next brother Dan taught us about Hope in the Middle. I don't think he was teaching about hope in mid life. As in hope in a mid-life crisis. The middle is where life takes place. There are beginnings and endings, but most of our life is smack dab in the middle. This is where our relationships happen. Our relationships will never be perfect, but because of Christ, not only can we make it through the difficulties, but he can use us as instruments of his grace.

Next we went from Good to Great. How do we take average, ok, pretty good relationships to great ones? Well this is where we learned about servanthood. We talked about Christ and the washing of the Apostles feet. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Remember the "one another" passages? So many serving opportunities, we just need to take that step and serve one another.

Two weeks ago we talked about our time and money. We can tell a lot about people by looking at their calendars and their checkbooks. God lavishes his resources and grace on us so that we may share them in the lives of others.

Last week was our week on resting in God's sovereignty. In Psalm 3 and 4 we see the end of the David and Absalom saga. Absalom, David's son -trying to kill his father and takeover his kingship, is killed. In this moment David mourns his son and it is in this moment David is able to rest. We don't rest when we know everything. That will never happen. We rest in the middle of our stuff! David is able to rest because he understands that rest can only be found when you're resting in the LORD. He is in charge. He is writing your story. He is near. He is wise. He is loving, and He is very good.

So here we are: our boxes are full and taped up. Each one labeled. Our bags are packed. It's time to move out. Time to take this stuff and do something with it. Don't just leave it in the boxes. Don't just put it in a storage unit and forget about it. Let's move out.

Matthew 5:13-16 says:

"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

We all are in relationships with unbelievers and this verse tells us what we are to be with them. Salt and light. We should be using these relationships as opportunities for evangelism. We are salt and it needs to be salty. I'm telling you to be salty. The Gospel needs to be ever present on your mind ready to be dispensed. We need to be light in this dark world. We shouldn't be hiding our light under a bushel. NO!....This little light of mine. John 1:5 - The light shines in the darkness and the darkness doesn't understand it. We need to be shining in this dark world. We are to be like Christ and we see in 1

John 1:5 - that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. Want to have successful relationships? Be like Christ. Be salty and shine your light.

We all are also in relationships with believers. The Gospel is true, active, helpful, and necessary in those relationships too! When we face conflict, or communication problems, or we are involved with those who aren't honoring God with their time/money we've got to go back to the Gospel. To quote Jerry Bridges - "We need to be preaching the Gospel to ourselves daily." And we need to be using it in our relationships too. We are to be pointing our brothers and sisters in Christ back to Christ. How we live in our relationships needs to be reflecting the truth we know that resulted from Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

It's time to unpack these truths from the last 12 weeks. Go back to Scripture in your relationships. Take time to ponder what God is teaching you in them. Be salty.