

***Alive and Well***  
*What We Can (and Cannot) Control in Relationships*

Today we continue in our sermon series entitled *Alive and Well*. We're discussing how to thrive in the core relationships in our lives. So far we've discussed parenting, singleness, and marriage. Beginning next Sunday we'll take two weeks to explore what the Scriptures say about friendships. The final message in this series will deal with relationships in the body of Christ. But today we're going to discuss a reality that has relevance for each of these core relationships.

Both Scripture and experience confirm that ***We have limited control over the health of our relationships.*** (Acts 15, Philippians 4:1-3, Romans 12:18)

As we've been discussing throughout this series, we ***can*** do many things that will promote healthy relationships. But ultimately very few things are within our control. We cannot control other people and their responses to us; and we cannot control our circumstances. Understanding that we have limited control over the health of our relationships shouldn't make us panic; the fact that we are not God really is good news.

We will first look at two examples of believers - mature, committed followers of Christ - who experienced conflicts or disagreements that weren't easily resolved. This first is found in Acts 15. Paul and Barnabas had returned from their first "missionary journey" and had participated in what we now call "the Jerusalem council" which confirmed that you didn't have to follow the Jewish Law to be a good Christian.

36 After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are."

We see this pattern in Acts. Paul and others returned to the churches in each of the cities where people had come to Christ. They were eager to find out how they were doing and to continue investing in their lives.

37 Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. 38 But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.

Back in Acts 13:13, Luke simply recorded that in the middle of their first missionary journey "John [Mark] left them to return to Jerusalem." We aren't told whether John Mark was sick or homesick or full of fear; we simply don't know why he went home. But here in Acts 15 we find out that because John didn't complete the first journey, Paul didn't want him to go with them on the next journey.

39 And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. 40 But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.

Paul and Barnabas had a very long, tender relationship. Barnabas was the one who believed in Paul when almost nobody else did. Barnabas had used his influence to make sure Paul was welcomed by the church in Jerusalem (see Acts 9:26ff). And yet they had “such a sharp disagreement” over John Mark that they “separated from one another.” They were both very mature, spiritually committed men, but neither was able to convince the other that his evaluation of John Mark was wrong. They reached an impasse. And so Barnabas took Mark with him to Cyprus, and Paul took Silas with him to visit established churches in Asia Minor.

The next example is in Philippians 4. Paul is writing to the church at Philippi.

1 Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved. 2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord.

Imagine this letter being read aloud for the first time when the church gathered, probably on the “Lord’s Day” (Sunday). Paul urges these two women to “live in harmony in the Lord”; the NIV translates it “be of the same mind in the Lord.” Apparently they were at odds with each other in their thinking. Notice how Paul solicits help from one of his trusted companions in Philippi:

3 Indeed, true companion, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Here we learn that these two women weren’t immature or uncommitted. They were Paul’s co-workers who had “shared his struggle in the cause of the gospel” along with many others in Philippi! They were valuable for the cause of Christ in Philippi. And yet they needed help living in unity. This example confirms that even valuable, growing believers (perhaps *especially* valuable, growing believers) sometimes need help getting along. Paul might have had Barnabas in mind as he wrote these verses.

A passage that can help us think about difficult relationships is Romans 12:17–21. Paul is writing about a wide variety of different relationships in the last half of this chapter. Let’s pick up Paul’s train of thought in verse 17.

17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. 19 Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. 20 “But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Verse 18 is so very nuanced and insightful:

18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

Do you see how Paul acknowledges that it's not always possible to be at peace with everyone? There are so many factors beyond our control. But **if possible**, be at peace with everyone. Do everything within your power to mend and restore relationships. Jesus told His disciples (Matthew 5) that if you're bringing some offering to God and remember that your brother has something against you, leave worship, go find your offended brother, and be reconciled. If you do this you are taking a risk because your brother or sister may reject your efforts to reconcile. S/he may say, in effect, "Sorry, but I have no interest in mending this relationship or forgiving you."

Several years ago I ran across a word in 2 Timothy 3:3 that stopped me in my tracks. Paul is describing the things that characterize people without Christ and without the influence of His Spirit. One of the qualities he mentions is that they are **irreconcilable**; for whatever reason they are unable and/or unwilling to reconcile. Sadly, sometimes it is not possible to be at peace with some people.

Paul also acknowledges that in relationships not everything depends on you. If possible, **so far as it depends on you**, be at peace with everyone. In other words, let it not be said that the reason you are at odds with someone or estranged from someone is because you are unwilling to listen, unwilling to humble yourself, or unwilling to forgive someone who is repentant (see Luke 17:3).

This verse doesn't give us permission to dismiss people or to easily conclude that a relationship is too far gone. The Scriptures actually place a high value on reconciliation. But this passage does acknowledge that we have a limited amount of control over the health of a relationship. As Larry Osborne says, "God is omni-everything and I am omni-nothing." You and I are not all-powerful and able to make every relationship work. And even God (who **is** all-powerful) gives people a degree of freedom to decide whether or not they want a relationship with Him.

When you think about it, some of the most spiritual-minded and mature people in the Bible each had relational conflicts that were beyond their control. We've seen that Paul had conflicts with Barnabas and John Mark that were not easily resolved. David, "a man after God's own heart," had a son (Absalom) who wanted to take his life and claim the throne for himself. And, of course, Jesus' relationship with Judas ended without reconciliation.

All of this suggests that we have limited control over the health of our core relationships. In other words, I am responsible to be faithful as a husband, a friend, a parent, and a brother in Christ. But that doesn't mean that I can control the outcomes of those relationships. My wife, my friends, my kids, my brothers/sisters in Christ have to do their part as well.

It might be helpful to think about this in terms of having **appropriate boundaries**. The term "boundaries" (as we're using it) isn't found in Scripture, but it's a biblical concept. Simply put, a boundary delineates when one thing stops and another begins. A person without appropriate boundaries will experience all sorts of troubles. For example, if I'm

not clear about the boundary between my yard and my neighbor's yard, I might look over and decide, "I don't like the color of his house. I think I'll go paint the side of his house that I have to look at every day." If I did that my neighbor would feel disrespected and violated.

A similar thing is true concerning boundaries in relationships. If I don't understand where my responsibility ends and the other person's responsibility begins, I'll cause and experience all sorts of trouble. If, for example, a person doesn't understand the boundaries implicit in Romans 12:18, might think, "If I were spiritual enough, every relationship in my life would be healthy."

If you accept the boundaries implicit in Romans 12:18, you will think, "I am responsible to pursue reconciliation. But peace it's not always possible, and everything doesn't depend on me." This doesn't mean that you give up on the relationship; you can continue praying and continue loving the other person. But you don't have to feel like a complete failure when everything isn't "fixed." There is great freedom in realizing that **by God's design** we cannot control the health of relationships.

We have limited control over the health of our relationships. So what **can** we control? What should be our focus? As we answer this question, bring to mind a core relationship in your life that you care about. It could be a relationship that is basically healthy that you want to be more healthy; or it could be a relationship that's in trouble. It could be in your family or in the church or in your workplace or neighborhood. As we talk about focusing on the things under our control, keep that relationship in mind.

***Pay attention to your words.*** (James 3, Proverbs 15:1-2, Ephesians 4:29, etc.)

Many Scriptures make clear that we are responsible for the words we speak. Jesus said that we will one day be accountable for every careless word we speak (Matthew 12:36). Many times we are far too quick to justify our careless and/or sinful words - blaming **our** words on **other** people: "The reason I spoke so harshly is because you are so annoying" or "The reason I'm not gracious is because you're wrong and I'm right." No, actually, Scripture makes clear that we are responsible for the words we speak.

It is really hard to overstate the importance of our words. The words that come out of our mouths can make or break the core relationships in our lives. James 3 stresses how destructive words can be. As we'll see, believers have the capacity to use words for great good, but if we are walking according to the flesh, James tells us, our words will be very destructive, far more destructive than we realize.

5 So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. 7 For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. 8 But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.

If we aren't careful, we will find ourselves injecting "deadly poison" into the core relationships in our lives. Our tongues will be an expression of hell instead of heaven, instruments of unrighteousness instead of righteousness. Apart from the grace of God, no one can tame the tongue.

Therefore, in the core relationships in our lives, we would be wise to pay attention to the words we speak - what we say and how we say it.

29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.

The word translated "unwholesome" literally means "rotten." Just like you wouldn't want to put anything rotten into your mouth, nothing rotten should come out of your mouth. As Elizabeth Elliot once said, "You should taste your words before you speak them."

True to his pattern, Paul doesn't merely tell us what not to say; he goes on to tell us what our words should accomplish.

29 . . . but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.

Paul says that we need to limit our words to only those words that are "good for edification" - only those words that build other people up, only words that are helpful for the well-being of those around us. Paul clarifies further when he says "according to the need of the moment." Now that's a radical idea: words are supposed to meet needs (whether the need for encouragement, for counsel, for sympathy, or for correction).

Paul clarifies even further when he says "that it may give grace to those who hear." Through our words we give gifts (the basic meaning of "grace") to those we're talking with. Just like we work in order to earn money so we can give to those in need, we are to **speak** in order to give grace to those in need. From Paul's perspective words have a very specific function: to meet the need of the moment.

I'm guessing that most of us didn't grow up thinking about words this way. Maybe you grew up using words to impress people, using words to insult people, or using words to manipulate people. So how do we become people who meet needs and give grace with our words? We don't memorize a few stock expressions for different circumstances.

It turns out that if you want to change your words, you have to **Pay attention to your heart**. (Luke 6:45, Proverbs 4:23, Psalm 139:23-24) Jesus makes the connection between our words and our hearts in several places. One of them is Luke 6:45.

45 "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.

This is exactly what Jesus was saying: our words are an expression of our hearts. If you want to be able to speak words that give life to your family, friends, and coworkers, you need a heart that is full of the same. Just as a pear tree **cannot** produce apples, if your heart is full of anger, bitterness, judgmentalism, jealous, malice, etc. you cannot speak words that are gracious and nourishing to the people around you. The mouth speaks from that which fills the heart.

Proverbs 4:23 makes a very similar point.

23 Watch over your heart with all diligence,  
For from it flow the springs of life.

If you read the surrounding verses in Proverbs 4 (verses 20 through 27) you will see that the dad is telling his son to pay attention to the members of his body - his eyes (what he sees), his ears (what he hears), his mouth (what he says), and his feet (where he goes). In that context he says, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life. The NIV translates the last half of the verse, "for everything you do flows from it."

Since our thoughts, words, and actions flow from our hearts - since we live from the heart - we would be foolish not to watch over our hearts with all diligence. So we should notice when our hearts are full of anger or apathy, pride or self-loathing. Whatever fills our hearts will eventually spill out into the core relationships in our lives. Think about the core relationship you want to see healthier. If you are angry with that person, your anger will show up in your words and actions; it may be sarcasm or criticism or frustration or "the silent treatment." But it will show up.

Since we are often oblivious to the condition of our hearts, David's prayer in Psalm 139:23-24 is so very wise:

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;  
24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me,  
And lead me in the everlasting way.

This is David's invitation for God (who knows our hearts exhaustively) to reveal to him the true condition of his heart and to lead him in eternal ways. This invitation to God is ultimately one of the best gifts you can give another person. It doesn't guarantee a healthy relationship, but it puts you in position for a healthy relationship. You are saying, "As far as it depends on me, I want my heart to be right with God and with others." You don't have control over the other person and his/her response; but you do have say over you own heart.

I'm going to give you a few moments to talk with God. You will probably want to continue this conversation with Him later. Express to Him whatever is needed:

- Perhaps you've realized you've been playing God in relationships, trying to control others and bend them to your will; release control to God.
- Maybe you realize that you've not respected others' boundaries; or perhaps you've not asked others to respect your boundaries.
- I dare say that all of us need to talk to God about our words. . . and therefore the condition of our hearts.
- Perhaps you want to pray David's prayer in Psalm 139: "Search me, O God, and know my heart. . ."