

## Wisdom in Relationships *Constructive Relationships*

Charlie Brown once said: “I love mankind; it’s people I can’t stand.”  
Relationships are a fact. Healthy relationships are a premium.

This is the final message in this short series titled *Wisdom in Relationships*. Chris kicked off the series off talking about *Corrosive Relationships*. We followed that up with these three admonitions from the New Testament letter of James:

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.... – *James 1:19*

I want to wrap up today focusing on *Constructive Relationships*. I’m going to go at the topic in this way: The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy:

. . . I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. – *I Timothy 3:15*

There are relational responsibilities within families – the human family and the particular family of which you are a part. It is also true of us who are in the family of God. There are responsibilities that are ours by virtue of being a part of that family – responsibilities that contribute to healthy relationships. I want to generalize the biblical teaching about relating to those who are part of the body of Christ so it might be applicable across the spectrum of relationships.

I did a study once of all the “one another” references in the New Testament. These are the “relational responsibilities” – biblical mandates or instructions for how we relate to others. The first and primary application is given for the relationships we have with others in the family of faith. But, as I said, they are applicable to all human relationships.

There are 28 of them – 22 stated in the positive and 6 in the negative. Here they are:

### **Positive:**

- 1) Accept one another
- 2) Admonish one another

- 3) Bear one another's burdens
- 4) Bear with one another
- 5) Build up one another
- 6) Care for one another
- 7) Be devoted to one another
- 8) Encourage one another
- 9) Forgive one another
- 10) Be hospitable to one another without complaint
- 11) Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another
- 12) Be kind to one another
- 13) Love one another
- 14) Live in peace with one another
- 15) Give preference to one another
- 16) Be of the same mind toward one another
- 17) Seek after that which is good for one another
- 18) Serve one another
- 19) Speak the truth to one another
- 20) Speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs
- 21) Be subject to one another
- 22) With all wisdom teach and admonish one another

**Negative:**

- 23) Don't challenge one another
- 24) Don't complain against one another
- 25) Don't envy one another
- 26) Don't judge one another
- 27) Don't lie to one another
- 28) Don't speak against one another

Do you think that obeying those commands might have a positive impact in the relationships you have? I think so.

Now, lest you think this message is going to be about three hours long, let me put your concerns to rest. I want to spend a little time on a few critical aspects of building constructive, biblical relationships. These represent categories under which fall many of these relational responsibilities.

▪ **Encourage one another** – The Apostle Paul writes to the believers in Thessalonica: “Therefore, encourage one another and build up one another, just as you are doing” (I Thessalonians 5:11).

We all need encouragement, don't we? This is one of those incredibly powerful things you can do in your relationship with others. We encourage with our words, with our actions, even with our countenance. If someone smiles at you, doesn't that elicit a different response than if they frown at you?

Part of encouragement is to accept one another, to bear one another's burdens, to be hospitable towards one another, to giving preference to one another, and to be kind to one another.

What a great responsibility we have towards others, especially in the body of Christ. We should be rabid cheerleaders in the lives of other believers – cheering them on in their spiritual race.

Chuck Swindoll, in his book *Growing Deep In the Christian Life*, tells of the day he couldn't get the following song out of his mind:

O give me a home where the buffalo roam,  
Where the deer and the antelope play,  
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,  
And the skies are not cloudy all day.

Home, home on the range . . .

He pondered the need of that kind of home in the church today. So, he wrote another set of words to the same tune:

O give me a church where folks in the lurch  
Are encouraged, then healed from above;  
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,  
And truth is modeled in love.

What a difference encouragement makes in someone's life. Encouragement helps build healthy, constructive relationships. Think of what this can do in friendships, in marriage, at work or school, with children.

Do you remember the mine collapse in Chile in August of 2010 and the subsequent rescue of the 33 trapped miners that mesmerized the world? I, like many, was glued to the TV watching them bring the first miner to the surface. But, imagine the emotion they must have felt when 17 days after the mine collapse they first heard from the surface. Someone was there! Someone cared! What a thrill. It was like throwing a lifeline to a sinking sailor.

Let me ask you: Do you need encouragement today? I want you to know – God cares; there are people here who care. Some of you have recently been on the receiving end of encouragement from others at Knollwood. It really makes a difference, doesn't it?

Let me ask another question: would you be sensitive this week to provide encouragement to someone else? It might be just a kind word, or maybe a written note letting someone know you are thinking of them, praying for them.

I have a file filled with encouraging notes I have received from people here at Knollwood. There are times I pull them out and read a few – especially during times of discouragement. Our words can be powerful instruments of encouragement by way of ministry in the lives of others.

▪ **Forgive one another** – Paul writes in Colossians three:

... bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.  
– *Colossians 3:13*

This word *forgive* means “to show yourself gracious, kind, to grant forgiveness.” It is the Greek word *charizomai* – a form of the Greek *charis* which means “grace.” To forgive means to grant grace to one another. We who hold adamantly to the truth of grace so often grant grace so sparingly to others. It does not mean that we overlook sin and offense, but that we quickly give grace to the offender, seeking a restoration of relationship and fellowship.

Forgiveness, I believe, is one of the most powerful, liberating forces in our lives. Without the willingness to forgive, people become bitter, hearts become hardened, and relationships fester from open wounds.

Is there someone in your life, in your past, who has sought forgiveness, but you have been unwilling to forgive? Perhaps you have been waiting for the pain to subside so you can feel like forgiving.

Is there someone in the past who has hurt you deeply? Perhaps it is a parent, a friend, a spouse. They may not even be aware of it, or they may be denying it, or perhaps they just don't care. Can you grant them forgiveness for Christ's sake? You will never be free unless and until you do.

To forgive is to release a debt. Someone has hurt you; they have offended you; they have incurred a debt. You can choose to release the debt. Therein is the path of freedom and release.

By the way, forgiveness is not the same as trust. Someone has betrayed your trust, you can forgive, but trust must be earned; it must be restored over time.

▪ **Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another.**

This is a term the Greeks could never seem to apply to themselves. William Gladstone, the learned prime minister of England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, once remarked to his scholarly peer John Morley:

It is a pathetic reflection that while humility is the sovereign grace of Christianity, the Greeks had no symbol in their language to denote it. Every word akin to it has in it some element of meanness, feebleness, or contempt.

The Gospel takes this word of contempt and elevates it to a position of a chief grace. It is best illustrated by Jesus, described in Philippians, chapter two:

Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. –  
*Philippians 2:6-8*

Now, true humility is not to think lowly of oneself, but to think rightly, truthfully of oneself. It is living not wrapped up in oneself: the world revolving around you – your needs, your accomplishments, your desires, your concerns. It allows you to be others-focused.

It has little to do with “feeling humble,” but everything to do with a proper ordering of oneself under God first and then being concerned about others. Paul writes to the Philippians with these instructions:

...complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. – *Philippians 2:2-4*

This is hard to do if we are not growing secure in who we are in Christ – if we elevate our needs, our status, our concerns above that of others.

Sometimes, for the sake of healthy relationships and for the growth of constructive relationships, we need to admonish one another.

▪ **Admonish one another**

Paul writes in Romans 15:14 that we are to admonish one another. The word appears again in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians.

And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak.... – *I Thessalonians 5:14*

There are three things of importance in what Paul writes:

**1) Admonish the idle**

The word *admonish* carries this idea: “to train by word” – whether encouragement or, if necessary, by reproof. It means “to warn, based on instruction.” Those who need admonishing are identified as “the idle.”

Paul speaks about those who fail to perform their duties, those who refuse to work, to conform to the normal, orderly way of gaining a living. It was a word used of soldiers who were disorderly, not fulfilling or performing their duties. The motive could be laziness; it could be those in the church of Thessalonica who had stopped working because they thought Jesus’ return was so imminent, they just became non-working busybodies, living off others.

**2) Encourage the fainthearted**

There's our word *encourage* again. It means "to console" – "to exercise a gentle influence by words; to soothe, comfort, encourage."

*Fainthearted* is literally "small-souled." It means despondent, faint in heart. Why would people be fainthearted? Perhaps they are fearful, feeling inadequate, discouraged, beaten down by life. They might be dealing with trials in their lives. Perhaps they have doubts in their faith. Can you identify with this at all? Have you ever been fainthearted?

Paul says we are to come alongside those faint in heart and, by our words, console, encourage, and comfort.

### **3) Help the weak**

The Greek text reads literally: "hold on to the ones being weak." It means "to support or help." The weak may be those who are weak in their faith, morally weak, without moral strength. This might be the weaker brother or sister, the one who is not yet mature in their faith. We are to help them. How do we do that? By holding on to them, by nurturing them in the faith, by teaching them, instructing them, helping them to grow and mature in Christ.

If you look again at these three things, you can see how important it is to respond appropriately. We are to admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted and help the weak. What happens if we are not discerning and respond differently? What happens if you encourage the idle? What if you admonish the fainthearted or the weak?

Each response Paul lays out is purposefully, intentionally, directed to its appropriateness for the person. We need to be sure we are applying the right ointment to each wound, the right action to each situation.

Paul then adds this: "Be patient with them all." Easy to see how you might become very impatient with the idle, with the fainthearted, and with the weak. We might even be offended by these folks. Paul says, "Cool your jets. Be patient." The word means "to be patient in bearing the offense of others; to be mild and slow in avenging, to be long-suffering."

This calls for us to be self-restrained in dealing with others, especially those who are idle, fainthearted or weak. Someone put it this way:

Patience is the ability to idle your motor when you feel like stripping your gears.

Let's consider one final responsibility that cuts across all our relationships:

- **Love one another** – The New Testament writers never tired of reminding Jesus' followers of the responsibility to love. The Apostle Peter writes: Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. – *I Peter 4:8*

One day a lawyer came to Jesus and tried to create a controversy by asking him a question. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" Jesus' answer, he supposed, would pit one religious camp against another. Here was Jesus' reply:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. – *Matthew 22:37-40*

Jesus begins with words from the *Shema* – a centerpiece of the Jewish morning and evening prayer services. One was to love God with every part of their being. It was a response to the goodness of God and their responsibility before God.

Then Jesus coupled this with the responsibility that God's people had in their relationships with others. Right relationships begin with the vertical and then extend to the horizontal. It's the perspective that the Apostle John articulates in his first epistle when he says: "We love because He first loved us" (I John 4:19).

Love is modeled in God's relationship with us. One of God's great attributes is love. Earlier in that same chapter, John writes:

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation (satisfaction) for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. – *I John 4:10-11*

Because God loves us, we in turn reciprocate our love for him, imperfect though it is. Then we love others with God's kind of love – a sacrificial love, a love that is

others-focused rather than self-focused. God's love is concerned with our well-being; loving others with God's love is concerned about their well-being.

Now, here is where the real struggle comes in. Sin has flawed the human race. Our focus is primarily towards ourselves. We are basically self-centered, selfish in orientation.

Here's where I think we have misunderstood the end of the great commandment. Jesus says we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Now, we live in such a narcissistic culture. Everything screams: "It's all about me."

In the movie *Beaches*, Bette Midler is showing a friend around her house, going on and on about herself. Then there is pregnant pause, followed by: "Enough about me. Now tell me, what do you think about me?"

W.H. Auden wrote:

Almost all of our relationships begin and most of them continue as forms of mutual exploitation, a mental or physical barter, to be terminated when one or both parties run out of goods.

If we are honest in evaluating our relationships, much of the time the focus is on what we get out of the relationship. Our actions are calculated such that we get what we want, desire or need.

In this way our actions are really selfishly motivated. As long as my needs are being met, as long as I am getting something out of it, there is value in this relationship.

But Jesus had in mind something far different. He is referring to a healthy view of oneself – someone who is valued and of worth because of their identity in God. When Paul describes how a husband is to love his wife, he uses a similar argument. He writes:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her....In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies.

He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church....

– *Ephesians 5:25, 28-29*

This is a healthy love of oneself – rooted in one's value to God. We are to love ourselves in this way – as a unique and special creation of God. It is with this same intensity and dignity that we are to love others.

To the believers in Colossae, Paul writes:

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. – *Colossians 3:12-14*

Paul is giving us a blueprint, a set of instructions, on how we are to relate to others. The context is how those who have experienced the love and saving grace of God are to treat others who are in the family of faith.

Three truths form the basis for relating to others in a selfless way. These truths are the foundation of being secure as a person – of finding one's identity in a relationship with Jesus Christ such that I am free to relate to others – not in a way to get something from them that in some way gives me my identity as a person, but to give to others what I have received from God.

We have been chosen by God for himself. We have been set apart for his possession, his purpose, his promise. We are loved.

Chosen, set apart and loved. Whether you feel like it or not, if you have believed in Christ, you are secure by the grace of God. This is your identity as a person. Only when we are secure, when we experience this security in our relationship with God, are we really able to fulfill these exhortations that follow in relating to others. Here are the relational consequences then of a Christian who finds their identity, their security, their fulfillment as a person in Christ:

Being secure in Christ, finding our sense of worth and identity in him, frees us up to be able to be compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, patient, forbearing, forgiving and loving. Without this security, we are always in a self-protecting, self-

promoting, self-asserting mode. Only when we are experiencing the security that comes from the grace of God will we be able to relate to others in such a godly fashion. This is the basis for healthy, constructive, God-honoring relationships. Relationships that are others-focused, not me-focused.

Relational Responsibilities – Let me close with some advice written by John Wesley, co-founder of Methodism along with his brother. It is a great guide to pursuing constructive relationships.

Do all the good you can, By all the means you can, In all the ways you can,  
In all the places you can, At all the times you can, To all the people you can,  
As long as you can.