How to Heal Our Closest Relationships

Second in the series: Building oHO Homes with Jesus

# Scripture: 1 Peter 3:8-16; 4:7-10

# Key thought: Jesus helps us make three spiritual decisions that bring healing to our closest relationships.

# Intro:

The central idea behind this series of messages is that our Christian faith can help us to build our closest relationships.

Better relationships are certainly something that is needed today. Marriages are failing at the rate of about 50%. Those who study workplaces tell us that people don’t quit jobs, they quit bosses. In other words, the reason they leave their job is more often because the boss doesn’t know how to get along with people or they can’t get along with the boss. It has little or nothing to do with the work, the skills needed etc.

Along a similar line, workplace researchers tell us that the main reason that people are either promoted or not promoted likely has more to do with their ability to get along with people than it does with their knowledge of the task.

The shape of homes is changing rapidly too. In 1960 73% of children lived with two parents in their first marriage. In 1980 it was 61 %. In 2014 only 46 percent of children lived with two parents in their first marriage. That is just one more indication that marriages in America need God’s help. In the home, whatever the shape of the home, parents also need great skills in relationships to build rapport with their children that will be sufficient for the storms of the teenage years.

So, we need all the relationship building help that we can receive from our Christian faith. Jesus told us that he came to give us life more abundantly, or life to the full as it is sometimes translated (John 10:10). One of the key ways that Jesus makes good on this promise is to help us overcome obstacles and increase closeness in our relationships. In short, Jesus teaches us how to love. John, the beloved disciple, understood this implicitly. He summarized simply:

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. 1 John 4:16 NIV

Our task this morning is to sort out from Scripture some of the practical helps that we need to improve our relationships. I am suggesting three Bible tips that will help us immensely in improving our family relationships, work environments, and friendships.

# With God’s help we decide to forgive and return good for evil.

The first tip for good relationships that I would like us to note is the second one in the text in the first Peter. This helpful step in building our closest relationships is to learn to forgive and to return good for evil.

We are reminded of the fundamental Christian value of forgiveness every time that we pray our Lord’s Prayer.

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

The passage that the apostle Peter has written in the text that we read this morning could well be considered an amplification of that short text from our Lord’s Prayer.

Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For,

“Whoever would love life and see good days   
must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech.   
 They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it.  
 1 Peter 3:9-11 NIV

Our cherished goal of having a fulfilled life is mentioned in three words in the text. First Peter speaks about inheriting a blessing. To do so, we need to be the kind of people who are willing to forgive and return good for evil. Secondly, Peter says if we want to love life and see good days; that is if we want to enjoy our lives, we should also be people who are willing to forgive and to return good for evil. When you stop to think about it, nothing ruins our happiness like holding a grudge. No one is unhappier than a bitter person. Lack of forgiveness hurts the one who does not forgive, not the one who is not forgiven.

Let me ask you; who is easier to live with – a bitter and unforgiving person? Or one who doesn’t hold grudges, who quickly let’s go of offenses, who resolves disagreements easily and does allow anger to simmer and stew? The answer is obvious from the relationship experiences of all of us.

Now I know that it is easier for some personality types to let go of slights, minor offenses and belligerent words than it is for others. But I think all personalities need to keep it in mind that being quick to resolve issues, to let go of offenses, makes life easier and relationships better.

Peter also challenges us as Jesus did, to go the 2nd mile. We are not just to forgive, but we are to be returning good for evil. Now there are situations of abuse where this advice is not applicable, where the only wise course is lack of contact. But in the everyday ups and downs of home relationships, friendships, and work relationships, returning good for evil is an amazing relationship builder.

Let’s say something happens between you and your neighbor that is a potential source for misunderstanding. Say his Memorial Day visitors park on your lawn making some dents and marks. Now you are a lawn nut whose lawn looks like a ball park or the after picture of a grass seed commercial, and you find this random parking very irritating. You neighbor, however, is the kind who occasionally mows what grows and parks on his lawn all the time. He didn’t even notice. You come a little unglued and don’t exactly speak to him nicely about the issue. However, the next weekend, he comes over with two big hanging baskets for your porch. Says he got some extra ones from his brother who has a nursery and thought you would enjoy them. Now how do you feel about the relationship? That’s the magic of turning good for evil in everyday relationships.

I should also add that I am quite aware that forgiveness is not easy in many situations—abuse, betrayal, etc. Remember that forgiveness does not mean it was okay. We forgive things that were wrong or offensive. And, by the way, we should not answer, “It’s okay.” When someone has offended and says, “I’m sorry.” The answer is “I forgive you.” Forgiveness is a choice not to seek revenge, not to get bitter, to leave consequences to God.

It’s also important to note that we do not decide to forgive because the person deserves it. We decide to forgive because Jesus has given us that example; because forgiveness is more spiritually and mentally healthy for us; and because forgiveness allows for a freer and happier future for us and others to whom we relate. If we refuse to forgive, the resulting bitterness may well poison our other relationships as well.

So, the first tip that we receive from St. Peter to help us build healthy relationships is this: Cultivate a habit of forgiveness and returning good for evil.

# With God’s help, we give our loved ones proper priority.

## Love is the key word

The second helpful suggestion for our relationships that I would like us to talk about today is the first one in the text in first Peter chapter 3. This helpful advice seems to be repeated in chapter 4. But the mentions are not strictly repetitive as a different Greek word is used.

Be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate 1 Peter 3:8 NIV

Love each other deeply, 1 Peter 4:8 NIV

Peter is actually using four different Greek words to help us get the point that if we are to master the skill of building relationships, we will need to learn to love one another, in all the different forms that love takes. The word for love in 1 Peter 3:8 is the Greek word for brotherly love. The word for love in 1 Peter 4:8 is the Greek word for agape love, that is love of the will, committed love. Love is the key word!

I would ask the question: What will it take for us to give our loved ones the priority that communicates love?

Everyone knows that everyone else is busy. But everyone also instinctively knows that a person makes time for what is the most important to them. So, at some level, time and attention given will translate into love received. When we are dealing with children that translation is quite literal and non-negotiable. But the equivalency maintains some currency at all ages. When we give quality time and focused attention, our loved one feels loved. Quality time is one of the five love languages enumerated by Gary Smalley in his bestselling book The Five Love Languages.

## Give your spouse priority

There is a related issue today. When it comes to our spouses especially; the first thing we need to do is to end the competition. Now we should not have to say that. But in today’s word we constantly need to remind ourselves of the fact that our spouse should have no competition for our affections.

### Negative competition

Unguarded friendships leading to affairs still are a big problem. And more so then ever since our media culture treats affairs as rather normal. They make good TV, but lead us into difficulties in our lives. The Bible considers any extramarital sexual relationship as sinful and adulterous. But in our world, it is so easy to have competing friendships that become dangerous. Our marriages often don’t survive that kind of competition.

Unfortunately, in our culture today, competing friendships are not the only source of competition. Other powerful sources of competition that need to be eliminated to defend our homes include all kinds of on-line fantasies, chat-room relationships and pornography. Somehow, we deceive ourselves into thinking that since it is only on the computer, it is not real. But the competition for our thoughts and emotions is very real. The unhealthy habits of thinking are enslaving our minds and negatively molding our futures. The destruction of our homes being brought about by such competition is very real as well. Giving our spouse priority means giving them proper place in our thinking too.

### Positive competition

In our world today, our spouses also often suffer from the competition for our time and affections from positive sources—things that are good and wholesome in themselves; they are just out of balance in our lives. Who of us does not know someone whose marriage has suffered because they gave themselves totally to their job at the expense of their marriage?

Getting rich from all that work may be nice, but Solomon says in Proverbs,

Do not wear yourself out to get rich;   
have the wisdom to show restraint. Prov 23:4 NIV

Hobbies, media watching, sports, community service activities, even church activities, all can take so much time that there is not time left to nourish our marriages and our relationships with our children.

Loving our closest family demands a priority in our lives that matches the relationship.

## Have some fun together

The second way that I recommend to people that they give priority to a relationship is to commit to having some fun together. Have a date night; go on a family picnic, take a vacation. If you are working with a class or group, get the class or group together for a social time. Having fun together is one of the key ways that we put friendship love into practice—the kind of love that Peter mentions in 1 Peter 3:8.

# We draw on His self-giving love to help us serve others.

Finally, we need to ask where we get the strength to do the kinds of things that we’ve been talking about? How do we find the courage to forgive and return good for evil when it feels more natural to us to retain our anger and withhold affection? How do we go the 2nd mile for the third or fourth time to bring new hope into a relationship at work that is going sour? How do we keep doing what we should to give of ourselves in a home relationship when the other person is not returning the favor? Sometimes maintaining a relationship or showing love to someone demands some one-sided giving. How do we keep doing that?

These are excellent questions. The only answer that we have is this: these are the kinds of times when we are challenged to draw on divine strength and ability. There are many situations in our lives that are spiritually beyond us. We do not have the ability to choose the right thing. Or we do not have the endurance to keep doing the right thing. We need God’s love flowing through us. We need the Holy Spirit to empower us to make a supernatural choice rather than the natural one. At this point we need to turn to what Peter says in chapter 3 verse 12.

The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.  
 1 Peter 3:12

This is when we look to God for his strength. We turn our eyes to heaven and pray, “God help me, I can’t do this on my own!” We will find ourselves able to draw on God’s strength to do more than we thought we could to make the right choice. What is the promise there? “His ears are attentive to their prayer!”

Listen to God’s promise as Paul wrote it and as it is translated in the NRSV.

For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Phil 2:13 NRSV

We can receive help from God for the challenges life brings in seeking to love others. Since God is love, then his Spirit at work in us will empower us to love, to meet the everyday challenges that come up when we are doing our best to be show the love of Jesus in our lives.

# Conclusion

Tell condensed version of “Guests in the Night” by Robert Gass - Third Helping of Chicken Soup p. 53