How to Overcome Relationship Difficulties

# Last in the Oct. 2013 series - How to Overcome

# Scripture: Col. 3:1-17

# Key Thought: The Bible gives strong recommendations that can help us heal difficulties in our relationships.

# Intro idea:

Two business partners have a bitter argument over how to handle a delinquent account and it threatens to dissolve a seven-year relationship. Husband-and-wife exchange bitter words and the argument degrades into the same exchange of old memories that always seems to happen when they have a disagreement. A father smacks his son for insolence; the son curses his father and his father returns in kind and tells him he is no good and worthless. These are three examples of the kinds of relationship problems that happen every day in our communities. Relationships didn’t seem to come with an instruction manual or did they?

What does the Bible have to say about the challenges we face in our everyday relationships with other people? I think most of us have now, have recently had, or will have at least one relationship situation that is very difficult. What Biblical wisdom can help us?

Even though Paul was a single man, he knew the importance of human relationships and in nearly every letter he wrote to churches, he took time to give practical advice for keeping relationships healthy. This morning I would like us to look at what he wrote in his letter to the Colossian church and glean three practical helps for our own difficulties in relationships.

# Don’t make it worse by sinning (vv. 5-11)

Often in our world, relationship difficulties are used as an excuse to do all kinds of things that are wrong. When our spouse or girlfriend betrays us or even simply makes us really angry, we use it as an excuse to drown our sorrows in a drinking binge, have an affair, get high on illegal drugs, lie about our finances, go into fits of rage, etc. Paul admonishes us particularly against three classes of wrong responses.

## Not by sexual immorality

That is the first part of this relationship oriented passage. Paul first forbids all kinds of sexual immorality for any Christian, not just by those in committed relationships. Why, because it undermines the foundations of good relationships. Immorality is immoral because it is destructive. Even if our marriage partner has broken their marriage vows before God, it does not make it okay for us to do the same. We will still be guilty before God of we are engaging in sex outside of marriage.

## Not by uncontrolled anger

Next he mentions all kinds of expressions of uncontrolled anger. All of us know that when we allow ourselves sot lose control of our temper in a relationship it makes matters worse. This does not mean that we cannot or should not tell our spouse or others we are in relationship with that when they do certain things, we feel a great deal of anger. That is just honesty in relationship. The problem lies in how we do that. Counselors advise us to express our anger with I statements rather than you statements. It will put the conversation on a whole different level. But things like profanity laden outbursts, domestic violence, bitter rehearsals of past issues, name calling – all these make things worse. Sometimes what happens when we fight can be harder to recover from than the issue that caused the disagreement in the first place.

Attitudes of bitterness and slander congeal into one of the deadliest of relationship habits. Speaking of slander, did you hear the one about the minister who was looking into the spiritual condition of one of his parishioners? When he asked her how things were going, she replied, “The old devil is still giving me trouble.” At that, her husband spoke up and said, “Now wait a minute, you’re not so easy to live with yourself.”

One of the ways we sin against each other is to give up hope, stop forgiving, and start expecting the other person to always do the wrong or bad thing. Counselors call this negative expectations and it is deadly because it blocks the possibility of improvement. Often these negative expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies. Paul tells us to reject bitterness and says in 1 Cor. 13, “Love always hopes…”

## Not by lying

Third, Paul forbids lying to each other. Sometimes we lie because we don’t feel safe to tell the truth. But we don’t realize that it still makes the long term prognosis for the relationship worse. Trust is one of the most values qualities at the heart of any friendship. Sooner or later a lie will be discovered and it will break down that trust. Sometimes, it’s not outright lying that we commit, but just deceit. We give an impression of one thing when another is the truth without actually saying an untruth. We live a lie without speaking it. That is still wrong and begins to build hypocrisy into the relationship. Paul warns us, “Don’t go that route!”

All these types of responses really make things worse not better. They hinder healing rather than helping it. They build barriers and increase distance in our relationships. Sin is destructive.

# Let the Spirit’s fruits rule. (vv. 12-14)

Ill. I remember a friend I had in high school who was an excellent wrestler. He was a strong farm-hardened lad and very smart too. He did very well on the wrestling team but his strategy was to not make mistakes and watch for his opponent to make a mistake and pounce on it. This worked very well and he won most of his matches until he reached the tournaments where the other wrestlers also did not make mistakes. There his strategy of elimination of mistakes was inadequate. He needed a strategy with a more active offense.

When we are facing relationship problems, it will not be enough just to avoid mistakes. And, just because we are Christians does not mean that our strategy has no offense. Many people think Christianity is just about being nice and hoping people don’t run over the nice guy. But our Christ-like way of living has a great offense. It is described in verses 12-14 among other places. These strategies when actively practiced actually put the person who would seem to be our enemy on the defensive.

Ex. Ill. Let’s say your dog Fido broke his chain while you were at work. Your new neighbor had a fit and actually called the dog catcher because Fido wandered into his lawn. You don’t see him often, but when you have, you’ve been greeted by an icy silence since then. But the time comes when the neighbor could really use some help that you could provide. Let’s say a tree falls in his driveway and he doesn’t have a chainsaw and you do. He’s too sensitive about his recent behavior to ask you for help. But you see his plight and go over with the chain saw and volunteer to cut his way out to work that morning. That’s letting the fruits of the Spirit rule – forgiveness, compassion, love, gentleness. I bet he doesn’t call the dog catcher next time Fido gets loose.

The characteristics listed here are compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with each other, forgiveness, and love. Four of these are also included in the list of nine fruits of the spirit in Galatians 5:22. The three that aren’t, compassion, humility, and bearing with each other, also require the Holy Spirit’s work in our inner selves in order that we are able to display them.

But when these characteristics are active in our personality, our ability to get along with people is greatly heightened. In addition our ability to overcome crises in relationships is multiplied. Third, our ability to continue in difficult relationships is strengthened.

# Win with gratitude. (vv. 15-17)

But one more thing is needed. Overcoming in times of relationship difficulties is really only possible when we win the inner battle for peace in our circumstances. That’s why Paul says in verse 15, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” That’s what Paul’s last section is about. I think he gives us three hints as to how to achieve that inner peace we need even when our relationship circumstances may not be the best.

## Allow God’s word to dwell in us

His advice is that we allow the word of God to dwell in us richly – the Greek word (Gk – plousios) means abundantly - We could say - expose yourself to God’s word in many ways - read it, listen to it read, go to Bible studies, hear it sung, meditate on it, and allow the Holy Spirit to speak through it to your heart. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, our tendency when we are in difficult spots in relationships is to alarm mind to rehearse the bad things that happened and nurse grudges. As long as we think like that, the situation is bound to get worse. What is needed is different food for thought for our minds. In order to achieve that we must start with forgiveness which relieves us from the necessity of having to remember the bad that has happened. Then we must make positive substitution. As we talked about last week start a new habit to replace the old bad one. So we fix our thoughts on Jesus. We feed our minds with the Holy Scriptures. We meditate on the word of God. And with new input going in, what comes out of our minds and hearts will also be different.

## Have hearts that can sing

Next Paul suggests that we sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in our hearts to God (verse 16). God’s people are singing people. Singing God’s truth engages a different side of our brains. It moves us in ways that simple recitation cannot. One of the quickest ways to memorize something is to sing it. Singing is one of the key ways we offer a sacrifice of praise to God.

When we are having a difficult time emotionally, intentionally singing will often lift our spirits. But you say, “How can I do that?” When I’m in a bad mood I don’t have anything to sing about. Well actually you do! Our heavenly Father is always worthy of praise. Jesus has done so much for you that you cannot help but give thanks to him. So even at the worst of times, if we can fix our thoughts on Jesus, and focus on our heavenly Father, there can be an honest song of praise. Once praise begins it engages our spirit and sparks additional praise.

## Be thankful

Finally, Paul tells us to realign our inner perspectives by giving thanks. In verses 15-17, three times Paul mentions thankfulness or gratitude.

One of the most powerful ways to bring peace to our spirit and a smile to our face is through thanksgiving. It is to be thankful for the good things we neglect to give thanks for because our minds are distracted by our problems. It is to give thanks even for the little gems that life’s difficult situations bring us as we endure the process. This last week, I was at the last Houghton College board meeting in my previous position as a district representative. Harriet Olsen, President of United Methodist Women, is the chairperson of the Academic committee. In her short devotional at the beginning of our committee session, she shared a quote concerning the difficult times in our lives. They can be looked at as “Grace with its winter clothes on.” In other words, just as in our planet’s harshest season, winter, there are times of great beauty if you look for it, so in the difficult and stormy times of our lives, God’s grace gives to us blessings, if we are looking for them.

A heart that is grateful has all but won the battle already.

# Conclusion

I close with a story of someone who struggled in new relationships related to her husband’s new job. Listen to how she overcame with God’s help and the help of others.

Grace Givers p. 57 Giving brings Healing