

## Dealing With Relationships in 2016

Today we're talking about our Relationships. This is one of the areas where slight changes can have major effects. Our relationships are the most important parts of our lives – our love for one another outweighs everything else in life. 1 Corinthians 13:13 says *“Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.”* Nothing's more important. The greatest experiences, thrills and joys that come into your life come because of relationships.

On the other side of things, our deepest lows come from relationships as well. Galatians 5:15 says, *“...if you act like wild animals, hurting and harming each other, then watch out, or you will completely destroy one another.”*

Relationships would be easy if we were perfect and we never had any struggles. But we're not perfect and our relationships aren't perfect. What do you do when things aren't going great; when you're frustrated; you're not sure where to turn next; you're overwhelmed by hurt or anger? What do you do if you just don't care as much anymore; when you're confused or struggling?

Fortunately, God has given us real direction for real world relationships, the kind of situations we live with and struggle with everyday. Anyone can make the problems in a relationship work out in a paperback novel or a Hollywood movie or a half-hour sitcom. But we need something more for the situations we live with every day - the real struggles of real life relationships. We need practical ideas from God's word to get through the tough days and make it through even when things seem to be falling apart. We need God to help us learn to love an imperfect person, restore a friendship or to fall back in love. So what do you do when a relationship isn't perfect?

**1. Accept Our God-given Differences.** One of the greatest ways we can begin to think more clearly about relationships is just recognizing that God made us different and wants us to be different. Would you agree that parents and teens sometimes think differently? That men and women sometimes think differently? That people in their 30s and people in their 70s sometimes think differently? These differences can cause moments of delight and at other times cause major difficulties.

Genesis 1:27 says, *“So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”* He made us in his own image but he also purposefully made us different – men and women. Studies show that there are differences in how our brains function as males and females.

I've helped set up and run weekend retreats for men and weekend retreats for women and let me tell you – it's different! You can have precisely the same material, the same exact program and it just goes in different directions!

But in spite of all the evidence that people have differences beyond just gender differences - different talents, different temperaments - we still get frustrated and say to ourselves, “Why can't she see it exactly the way that I do?” “He is so stubborn! Why can't he see it my way?” – because God made us to be different. You know, if two people agree on everything one of them isn't necessary anyway. So just stop fighting reality and you'll reduce your level of frustration.

We're different. God made us to be different not to frustrate us but to build us up. So that one person can give another an idea that they would never have thought of and help them grow in a way that they wouldn't have. You have to realize that sometimes it takes both people or many people to come up with a better answer, both people in a relationship to bring out the whole story. Thank God for our differences – they're one of the things that make relationships worthwhile!

Remember, Romans 15:7 says, *“...accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory.”* When I accept you as different, when you accept me as different and we enjoy those differences, the Bible says that's an act of praise to God. God made us to be different and when we enjoy those differences it brings glory to God.

But some of the problems aren't just differences. Sometimes it's frankly the faults of the other person. Sometimes we need to just accept one another and our differences but there are times when it's something we need to work through. What do you do then?

**2. Allow for Our God-given Differences.** Ephesians 4:2 says, *“Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love.”* Sometimes that's what love does – makes allowances for someone else's faults. Notice it does not say, “make excuses for someone's sins.” It's not saying it's ok for you

to stay in a sin or not deal with your problems. It does mean that you recognize that it takes time and patience for us to grow.

When you're disappointed in a relationship go to God with your disappointments. Sometimes those disappointments are just because none of us are perfect. The person you married the child you have, the friend you've made, they aren't perfect.

The thing is, sometimes things aren't really anyone's fault. Sometimes it's the world we live in that causes what disappoints us. Other times it's really our own ideas about how things should be that causes the disappointment. Sometimes we get some picture of how a relationship should look and work. We want to have a perfect wedding, a perfect honeymoon, come back to a perfect house, a perfect yard, and raise perfect kids who will go off to their perfect lives and then sail off to a perfect retirement. How many of you got as far as the perfect wedding? The perfect honeymoon. The perfect life? There's no such thing. Life isn't perfect. Yet we create some idealized image. In fact, we're inundated by images of what a perfect relationship is supposed to be in the media. It may be good entertainment but it's not real and not how life works. But then we're disappointed that something that never was going to happen, didn't.

So go to God with these disappointments. God can meet needs no one else can. One of the reasons we're so disappointed in relationships so many times is that we expect people to meet needs in our life that only God can meet. Of course we're disappointed! You can't expect a person to be perfect - only God is perfect! You can't expect a person to always be there for you - only God can always be there. Many times we're disappointed in people because we're just asking too much. If you're asking a person to never fail you, you're bound to be disappointed. Your husband will fail you. Your wife will fail you. Your kids will fail you. Your friends will fail you. Your pastors will fail you. Every single person you know; everyone you will ever meet will fail you. Only God will never fail.

When you face the disappointment with people you have a choice: bail out or stick it out. When you said, "I do," or you had that baby or you started that friendship, what you saw was the promise in that relationship. But when you're face to face with the disappointment that's part of every relationship, what are you going to do? That's the time when your faith and your character are being tested. What will you do?

1 Corinthians 13:7 says, "*Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.*" That's real life, facing real disappointment. The thing is, you wouldn't need faith or character if there was no disappointment and everything was perfect. So where do you find the strength to not give up; the power to endure through every circumstance? Go to God and let God give you the strength and the power to love in a way you've never loved before.

But what about those times when you don't feel disappointment, you don't feel hurt, you don't feel anger. The truth is you just don't feel much of anything anymore. It's just apathy. What about those times when you've just lost feelings for someone? What about those times when a husband no longer feels love or a wife no longer feels love? What do you do then?

**3. Acknowledge that God Is Your Refuge and Strength** - Recognize that we have a God who can be trusted to heal and restore our feelings. Psalm 62:8 says, "*O my people, trust in him at all times. Pour out your heart to him, for God is our refuge.*" Unlike other people or even ourselves we can trust God with our hope because as it says in Hebrews 10:23, "*Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise*"

The word "love" – means **both** a feeling and an action. Sure love is something I feel in a relationship. But it's also a way that I act. There are times when the feeling is dim or even gone. Then what you have left is the action. What will you do then? For feeling to be restored we have to act in love. Loving actions can eventually bring feelings back.

Some of you may be thinking, "Isn't that being phony or hypocritical?" No, it's being human. The truth is, feelings in our life go up and down for all of us. Have any of you who have married felt in love in the same way and at the same level every minute of your marriage? No. It doesn't work that way - feelings go up and down - so there are times we act in love counting on God to restore feelings moment by moment.

There are lots of ways and reasons why feelings dim or die in a relationship. But one of the biggest causes is when we see a problem but instead of dealing with it, we pretend it's not there. Everyone may know it's there

but pretends it's not. The longer you pretend and are silent about it, the more you'll experience a loss of feelings in a relationship.

There was a story in the news a few years ago. It sounds like something made up, but it really happened. A guy named Ray who tended to drink too much decided to have an alcohol-free Christmas Eve. So he decided to spend it in a monastery with some monks. But at the last minute he gave in and he snuck in a lot of wine. He got drunk and about midnight started to sing every Christmas song he knew at the top of his lungs. The monks had a vow that includes twelve-hours of silence every night so no one could tell him to shut up! They had to lay there and listen to him sing, badly, all night long. The father of the monastery commented that even though it was Christmas Eve it wasn't a silent night!

Some people almost take a vow of silence. They've decided, "We're not going to talk about *that* any more." And the longer you don't talk about it the more your feelings are going to drain out. The longer you pretend the more your feelings are going to die because you're denying and devaluing them. You would be shocked at how many people get divorced just because no one in the relationship has the courage to say, "We have a problem here." You'd be shocked how many people get divorced to avoid an argument, as crazy as that sounds. Stands up and break the vow of silence. Say, "We have a problem. Let's work on it. Let's get some help and really do everything we can to cooperate." Will there be an argument if you say that. Probably. But suffering in silence doesn't fix things and when you stop the silence and begin to deal with the problem, feelings can begin to return.

Lamentations 5 has a verse about our relationship with God and for some people that's where they need to start. It says, "*Restore us, O Lord, and bring us back to you again! Give us back the joys we once had!*" Ask God to bring back the joys in your relationship with God. Once you've done that, ask God to bring back the joys you used to have in your relationship with other people. No one is better than God at turning things around.

**4. Ask God For Direction** - God's the one who invented relationships – marriage, families, friendships – yet sometimes we fail to ask the universe's greatest expert for advice when we most need it. James 1:6 says, "*If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking.*" Ask God: "Should we get married or not?" Ask Him "What's the next step in our marriage? How do we get through this problem?" Ask Him, "What should I say to my kids?" Ask, "How do we get over this block in our friendship?" Ask God.

It says God will give you wisdom. How? Two major ways to hear what God has to say are:

1. You hear it through the Bible. There's an incredible amount of wisdom about relationships. Some of it's not easy to take but it's good. For instance, the Bible tells us that someone who is a believer and follower of Christ and someone who's not a believer and follower of Christ shouldn't get married to one another. That's hard wisdom for some to take. They say, "But we're in love." There are so many relationships that show that being in love is not enough. You need more than that to build a life. Why would God give this type of wisdom? Because God knows that if two people aren't heading in the same spiritual direction they're going to be in for suffering and struggles in their life together.

2. The next place you look is from other believers, other people who are trying to follow God's word. When it comes to relationships there are lots of people willing to give you advice, but not all of them are wise enough. Look for people who have good relationships, a good track record, and who go to God regularly to ask, "What do you want me to do?"

**5. Apply Jesus' Example to Your Life** – One of our tendencies as human beings is the tendency to worry about our own needs first and most – our inclination towards selfishness. At our core we always struggle with selfishness. All of us do. If you think you don't, you're probably one of the worst offenders! Even those of us who usually give of ourselves to others still have parts of us that want our own way. So let's admit that so we can take it into account.

There are a few techniques you can use to help you in this. There's no formula to help us become entirely unselfish, but there are some things that can help us make an unselfish choice. One way you can begin to behave more unselfishly is by giving yourself a selfish reason for being unselfish. I know it sounds strange but it works as a good first step. You say to yourself, "If I don't do what she wants in this situation, she's not going to be inclined to do what I want in that situation." Just give yourself a reason – there's nothing wrong with that. The Bible points out positive benefits for making the right choices all the time.

But then you have to go on beyond that. If only because there will be times in our lives when we can't figure out a selfish reason to make the right choice; times when we know the right choice but can't find the personal strength to make it.

What we need then is a better example and that example is Jesus Christ, the only completely unselfish person to ever walk this world. Jesus came into this world not for his own sake but for ours; the only one ever who didn't say, "What's in it for me?" He gave himself for us in order to give us not only a better example but also a greater power. Jesus came to live in this world so that I could have a relationship with him here and now. Now I can look at his example and, because of my relationship with him, I can find the power and strength to make unselfish choices I might not have made.

Ephesians 4:32 says, *"Be kind and loving to each other and forgive each other just as God forgave you in Christ."* How are you going to find the reason and the power to forgive someone who hurt you? There's no reason except for the fact that you need forgiveness and that Jesus has forgiven you. When I see how much Jesus has forgiven me, it gives me the strength to forgive someone else.

Philippians 2:3-6 says, *"Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to."*

Maybe you remember the story about a two little boys – Kevin, 5, and Ryan, 3 – sitting down to breakfast. Their mom's making pancakes. She brings them the first pancake and they both grab for it. Mom thinks this is a great moment to teach a moral lesson. She says, "If Jesus were here, he'd give his brother the first pancake and then sit and wait patiently." So Kevin looks at his little brother and says, "Ryan, you can be Jesus."

Isn't that one of the great questions of life? Who's going to be Jesus in the situation? Who's going to be the one that's going to make the unselfish choice in the situation? I've found that sometimes I need to be the one that makes the unselfish choice but sometimes someone makes an unselfish choice for me and changes my life.

We're not talking about being perfect. We're all going to struggle with selfishness the rest of our lives. But we're talking about the power of one unselfish act. Do you realize, that just doing one thing unselfishly because of the example of Jesus Christ and the power he gives can change everything in a situation? One unselfish act; one unselfish word can change everything. Sometimes everything hinges on that one moment of unselfishness.

Where are you going to find the power to do that? Not in yourself. Not just in Jesus' example – Jesus is more than just a role model. You find the power in your relationship with him. In that relationship with him you find the strength and motivation that enables you to be unselfish in your relationship with others. When you look at how much he's forgiven you for, you can find the strength to forgive others. When you see how patient he is with you to grow, how he waits for you to grow, you can find the strength to be patient to wait for somebody else as they grow. When you see the fact that Jesus Christ went to a cross and willingly sacrificed his life just because he loves us, you find the strength to sacrifice some of yourself for somebody else.

This final verse really sums up everything we've talked about today. 1 John 3:18 *"...let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions."*

What are you going to do about what we've been discussing today? If this is just inspiration without action it doesn't really mean anything. What will you do? Who are you going to talk to this week? What silence are you going to break this week? Who are you going to pick up the phone and give a call to this week? What one unselfish act or word will you offer this week? Think about it. Before you leave here this morning make a commitment to get started. Let's pray about this.