Relationships & Marriages & Other Messes

Session Two: The Mess and Struggles of Relationships

Why do we get angry? Why are we impatient? Why do we fail to be kind and gentle? Why do we hold a grudge or act out of vengeance? Why do we refuse to cooperate? Why do we say things to one another that should never be uttered? Why do we walk away in disgust? Why would we lie to someone or seek to manipulate? Why are we competitive and envious? Why do we struggle to rejoice at another's blessing?

We do all of these things for one reason: We want our own way, in the way we have chosen, and at the time we have deemed best.

We love us and we have a wonderful plan for our lives! We have a dream. The problem is that it is not the Lord's.

Ephesians 4:1-6, A Call to Unity
As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle: be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and on Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

You can't take the gospel seriously and not take your relationships seriously. But we tend to make compromises that negatively impact our relationships without seeing the contradiction.

According to Ephesians 4:1-6 what Paul believes and expects the grace of God to do in our relationships is:

- Maintain the unity of Spirit
- Make every effort
- Be humble, gentle, patient, and forbearing in love

According to Ephesians 4:17-32, Paul identifies seven tendencies of the sinful heart that are damaging to relationship, disruptive of God's purpose, and require persistent battling.

- The tendency toward self-indulgence (v. 19-24)
    - My behavior in the relationship is driven by what I want, not God's purpose.
- The tendency toward deceit (v. 25)
    - I will manipulate the truth to get what I want out of the relationship.
- The tendency toward anger (v. 26-27)
    - I want to control the relationship by venting my anger or holding it over you to control you.
- The tendency toward selfishness (v. 28)
    - I want to protect what I have, rather than offer it to serve you.
- The tendency toward unhelpful communication (v. 29-30)
    - Rather than use my speech to make you feel better and put you in a better position, I speak to make myself feel better and ensure that I am in the top spot.
- The tendency toward division. (v. 31)
    - I give in to the temptation to view you as an adversary, rather than a companion in the struggle of relationship.
- The tendency toward an unforgiving spirit. (v. 32)
    - I want to make others pay for their wrongs against me.

One of the first places we see the evidence of God's grace personally is in the realization that relationships demand hard work. We become willing to enter the struggle rather than avoid it, because we start to see that this is where God is present and active. We begin to run towards rather than run away from them, and we begin to experience the following:

- How much wiser God's plan is for us than our plan for ourselves (v. 19 – 24)
- The life-changing power of truthfulness (v. 25)
- The healing benefit of gentleness, patience, and love (v. 26-27)
- The joy of serving the needs of someone else (v. 28)
- The value of loving and wholesome communication (v. 29-30)
- The beauty of functional unity in a relationship (v. 31)
- The freedom of practicing forgiveness (v. 32)

QUESTIONS TO SERIOUSLY CONSIDER:

What do you want out of your relationships?

What do you want God to accomplish in those relationships?

Will you settle for comfort, approval, ease, and happiness, or are you willing to take up the biblical vision for relationships revealed in Ephesians 4?

(pp. 42 – 51 of Relationships – A Mess Worth Making)

All kinds of suffering, including conflict with others, can be redemptive because of the grace of God. By redemptive, we mean that God can use conflict (as well as everything else in our lives) to defeat sin in us and make us more like Christ, with a love for him and others that reflects his nature.

The closer you are to someone, the more potential there is for conflict. Relationships are costly, but so is avoiding them. If you choose to avoid them, you will minimize the conflict in your life, but that safety has liabilities of its own. If you choose to face the conflict head on, it is full of risks and the potential for great hurt, but it can also be redemptive. Either way, you will not remain untouched by your decision.

What is your tendency?

- Do you tend to avoid conflict?
- Do you rush into it?
- Or do you move into conflict with a God-centered perspective?

What tends to produce conflict in your life?

- **Is it comfort?**
    - I want, must have, and deserve comfort and you'd better not get in the way of me getting it.
        - **I fear hard work.**
- **Is it pleasure?**
    - I want, must have, and deserve pleasure and you'd better give it to me!
        - **I fear pain.**
- **Is it recognition?**
    - I want, must have, and deserve recognition or I will be devastated.
        - **I fear being overlooked.**
- **Is it power?**
    - I want, must have, and deserve power and you'd better do what I say!
        - **I fear being told what to do.**
- **Is it control?**
    - I want, must have, and deserve control and you will feel the brunt of my disappointment if you mess up my tidy little universe!
        - **I fear unpredictability.**
- **Is it acceptance?**
    - I want, must have, and deserve acceptance and you are responsible to give it to me.
        - **I fear rejection.**

Who is God using in your life this way?

- Do you see that your wise, sovereign, and gracious Redeemer is acting on your behalf when he placed this person in your life?
- If so, you are growing in your ability to engage in conflict in godly ways.
- Remember, you can't avoid conflict, but it can be a place where amazing growth takes place!

As your heart is reclaimed by the grace of God, ask questions about what it will look like to engage in godly conflict.

- Do you need to pursue someone and confront him?
- Do you need to be patient and encourage him?
- Do you need to overlook an offense?
- What sins and weaknesses in the other person do you need to consider as you decide what your next move will be?

(pp. 78 -87 of Relationships – A Mess Worth Making)