

“FOSTERING GOOD RELATIONSHIPS”
(2 Corinthians 6:11-13; 7:2-4)

This morning I want to talk to you about fostering good relationships. Learning how to relate to people is one of the most important skills in life, and plays a big part in obeying the second greatest commandment to love your neighbor as you love yourself. Our passage today in 2 Corinthians 6 and 7 focuses primarily on our relationships with each other in church, but applies to all our relationships.

I’ve spent my whole life going to church. I was born on a Sunday and was in church the next Sunday, so I’m told. I’ve been around church since I was a week old, and I still wake up Sunday mornings with a warm feeling that today is church day – I like church. Most of my church experience has revolved around three churches – the church I grew up in, the church I served at full-time and part-time for twelve years as a youth pastor before coming here, and our church where I’ve been for the past 28 years. Over the years I’ve heard all kinds of stories about church conflicts, splits, and scandals, but somehow I’ve had the good fortune to not be in churches like this. I’ve seen my fair share of squabbles and hurt feelings and people who leave church – and maybe I’ve just forgotten some bad experiences – but overall I’ve somehow escaped the really bad church experiences that many have.

But every church is going to have relationship conflicts simply because where you have people you have conflict. If you put two people together in marriage, you’re going to have conflict. If you work alongside someone, you’ll have disagreements. So it come as no surprise that when you put two or more people together in church, you’re going to have relationships issues – and it’s good for us to remember that conflict is normal – for the simple reason that God has made us all different and no two people are going to look at things the same way. The problem is that many people, at the first sign of conflict or disagreement, jump ship and leave rather than work towards understanding and resolution.

A recent study revealed that 20 million evangelical Christians in the United States do not attend church. Many still read their Bible, they pray, they listen to sermons online, but they don’t go to church. One of the big reasons, the study shows, is because a large number of people in the past few years have moved and haven’t gotten around to finding a new church. Another reason is that many have had bad church experiences in the past and don’t want to risk another bad experience. I get it – relationships are hard and you can get hurt – but it doesn’t negate the fact that the local church is God’s Plan-A for our spiritual growth and it is assumed in the New Testament that every believer will belong to a local church.

You can grow to a certain degree on your own, but true growth comes from being part of a church body where you have support, encouragement, and accountability. And it’s only by rubbing shoulders with other people different than you that you learn how to be more like Christ. If you’re going to grow in patience, you learn it by being around people who test your patience. If you’re going to grow in love and kindness and gentleness and self-control, you practice it by being around people.

As we come to our study of 2 Corinthians this morning, the Apostle Paul addresses a relationship rift that existed between himself and the Corinthains church, and our passage today is filled with valuable insights on relationships and working through conflicts. What’s interesting is that Paul begins talking about his relationship with the Corinthians in 6:11-13, but then detours to talk about their relationship with unbelievers in 6:14-7:1 (which we’ll talk about next week), then he resumes talking about his relationship with the Corinthians in 7:2-4.

In this broader section Paul addresses two problems the Corinthians had in the area of relationships. The first problem is that they had allowed Paul's opponents to drive a wedge between themselves and Paul, and he seeks to have their once-close relationship restored. The second problem is that some of the Corinthians still had close relationships with unbelievers who were dragging them back into the world, and he will tell them to cut off those harmful relationships.

Our focus today is on the first problem, and before we read our passage, it's helpful to understand the rocky relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church. Paul came to the city of Corinth five years earlier and preached the gospel. He took those who responded to the gospel and started a church, then spent 18 months pouring his life into the lives of these new believers, but after he left some very powerful and persuasive teachers infiltrated the church and began to criticize Paul and discredit him in the eyes of the congregation, and it worked.

They said, "Paul is fickle – he says he's going to do something, but does something different. You can't trust him." And the Corinthians said, "That's exactly what Paul does. He's changed his plans on us more than once – he says he's going to come visit, but he never showed up."

They said, "If Paul was a real apostle, he'd have reference letters to verify his ministry, but he doesn't have any." It planted a seed of doubt in the congregations mind... "Why doesn't he have any letters?"

They said... "Why would a true apostle suffer so many hardships and setbacks – wouldn't you expect them to be more successful and more respected?" And the people began to think, "Maybe Paul isn't all that he's cracked up to be," and little by little their trust in him began to erode.

Perhaps you've been the victim of a smear campaign where someone tries to tear you down and do harm to your reputation. It's especially hard to defend yourself when, like Paul, you are hundreds of miles away and the communication pipeline is slow and limited. Paul didn't so much care about defending himself for personal reasons – his primary interest was in protecting the gospel, and since the Corinthians heard the gospel through Paul, if they didn't trust Paul, they wouldn't trust the gospel. So Paul does everything possible to defend his character and ministry so that their confidence in him would be restored.

With this backdrop, let's read both of these passages. In 6:11-13 Paul writes... "We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also."

Then going over to 7:2-4 Paul continues his train of thought... "Make room for us in your hearts. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one. I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you. I have spoken to you with great frankness; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds."

In these verses Paul models six important traits that should characterize our relationships, and the first trait we notice is **warmth**. If you were Paul and you had all these nasty things said about you, and you had people you loved thinking ill of you, you'd probably wouldn't have warm feelings for them. But Paul's tone is tender and warm – he greets them as "Corinthians." It's not... "You immature, backstabbing Corinthians... It's more a tone of... "My dear beloved Corinthians." There's warmth and kindness in his words.

What's more in verse 13 he refers to them as "my children." Paul was their spiritual father – he led them to Christ and built into their lives for 18 months. He loved them like a father loves his children. Yes, you get mad at them and they can drive you nuts, but you love them unconditionally.

Don't underestimate the value of warmth in relationships. One thing I often hear people say who go to a church for the first time is: nobody talked to me. I don't know how that happens – I don't think it happens here – but church should be the friendliest, most welcoming place there is. Some people are naturally warm – they greet you with a smile, or give you a hug, and give you their full attention. Others, have to work a little at being warm. Warmth, like love, is something that springs from receiving God's love. Romans 5:5 says that God's love has been poured into us by the Holy Spirit, meaning that you have the supernatural ability to show love and warmth to others, and it begins in the body of Christ.

In his first book to the Corinthians Paul told the congregation to greet one another with a holy kiss. We don't do a lot of kissing around here, and you probably don't want to be kissed when you walk into church, but in first century culture kissing was a common way of greeting people you were close to and liked. You didn't kiss enemies or people who didn't like. You kissed people who were like family to you, and church was family. The problem in 1 Corinthians is that they weren't acting like family – they were divided and tension filled the air. They needed to get their differences resolved and forgiven and start kissing each other. In our culture, greeting each other with a physical display of affection like a handshake or hug is a way of saying, "We're family. Despite our differences, we are one in the Lord."

Along with warmth, a second trait Paul models is **openness**. In 6:11 he says, "We have opened wide our hearts to you." In verse 12 he says, "We are not withholding our affection from you." Paul's heart was open wide to the Corinthians, which means that his heart was full of love for them. I'm not sure my heart would be full of love for them and all they had put him through, but Paul was committed to not letting his heart grow cold towards them.

If God has poured His love into our hearts, we have the supernatural ability to have a wide, generous love for others. Some folks you interact with have very closed, restricted hearts – you try talking to them but don't get much response – they are guarded and suspicious – and often times it's because they've been deeply hurt. When someone hurts you, your natural instinct is to say, "I'll never put myself in a position to be hurt again." You may not even be aware that you've made that vow, but it influences every relationship you have. Instead of giving love, you guard it, and instead of developing intimate relationships, you avoid them.

I was reading an article this week that said a billion people worldwide struggle with loneliness – one out of every seven people say they experience loneliness on a daily basis. You'd think that older people are more lonely, but surveys show that young adults, ages 19-29, are the most lonely. Experts say that the physical impact of being socially disconnected is similar to smoking 18 cigarettes a day, and loneliness is even worse for you than obesity and physical inactivity. It also leads to the massive increase of mental health issues that are plaguing our culture. Relationships are hard and they are risky, but not having them is deadly.

Most of us know what it's like to get dumped in a dating relationship, and when you do, your first reaction is to say like Dion Warwick, "I'm never going to fall in love again." If you don't know who Dion Warwick is, you'll have to look her up. Why run the risk of getting your heart broken again? But then you realize that if you don't take the risk, you're going to be forever alone. To find love you have to risk putting your heart on the line.

C.S. Lewis had this very famous quote: “Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.”

The epidemic of loneliness we see today is a clarion call for us to open wide our hearts and reengage in relationships. It's a call to take a risk. It's no coincidence, I believe, that the uptick in loneliness parallels a decline of church attendance. There's no better place to develop relationships than in church – it takes time, it takes effort, and it involves risk – but it is an indispensable part of God's plan for our lives.

A third trait Paul models is **transparency**. In 6:11 Paul says, “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians.” To speak freely means to speak what is honestly in your heart without pretense. In 7:4 he says, “I have spoken to you with great frankness.” To speak frankly means to speak honestly and directly.

This is what Paul has been doing throughout 2 Corinthians – rather than avoid the criticisms aimed at him, he deals with them head on. In 7:2 he says, “We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one.” Part of the rift between Paul and the Corinthians is that they didn't entirely trust him, and lack of trust is a relationship killer. Paul goes to great lengths in his letter to defend himself and assure them that he's done nothing to wrong to them as his opponents claimed.

Paul addresses every accusation made against him. In chapter 1 he says, “Let me explain why I changed my plans and didn't visit you.” In chapter two he explains that he doesn't carry reference letters because all the lives changed through the gospel is his proof of apostleship. In chapter 3-5 he explains that his suffering is also proof of his apostleship and was part of what brought the gospel to them. Paul says, “I have spoken freely to you and addressed every accusation and concern you have.”

Relationships require that we truthfully and honestly speak what needs to be spoken without holding back. Speaking freely doesn't mean, however, that you need to speak everything that's on your mind, or that you don't choose your words and tone wisely. Colossians 4:6 says, “Let your words be spoken with grace and seasoned with salt.” Ephesians 4:29 says that we are to speak only what is helpful for building others up. Ephesians 4:15 says we are to speak the truth in love – be truthful and honest, but do so in a loving way.

The temptation, because we don't like conflict, is to be keep things bottled up inside. Instead of speaking the truth in love, we turn passive-aggressive. We give someone the cold shoulder, we give them the silent treatment, we talk about them behind their back, or try to sabotage something they're trying to do. Jesus said, “If you have an issue between a brother or sister, or you know they have something against you, drop what you're doing and go settle it.” Go to them in love and humility, communicate your feelings, seek to understand where they're coming from and gain information you maybe didn't have, and do what is in your power to resolve the situation.

The fourth trait Paul models is **commitment**. In 7:3 he says, “I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you.” Paul does not want his defense of his character to shame the Corinthians – he doesn't want to come across like he's angry with them and make them further retreat from him. He restates his love for them and says, “You have such a special place in my heart that I would live or die with you – I will love you to the death – you might act like turkey, you might drive me nuts, but I will love you to the end.”

It's the kind of love Ruth expressed to her mother-in-law Naomi when she said... "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried" (Ruth 1:16).

Relationships require commitment, and part of the reason we are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness today is because commitment to anything has largely been abandoned or ignored – whether it's commitment to marriage or to church or to friendships – the bedrock of society depends on people committing themselves to the core relationships that bind us together. Not only is commitment important to society as a whole, it's important to us as individuals. Research consistently shows that people who are married, who are committed to their families, and who go to church every week live more satisfied, fulfilled lives. On the flip side, those who are not committed to marriage or church or friendships score the highest levels of dissatisfaction and depression.

Paul says, "I'm committed to you in life or death, for better or worse, in good times and bad." Imagine if every church member had this attitude. There are times, I understand, when people leave churches for valid reasons, and I understand that churches sometimes stray from sound doctrine or leaders fall into sin – but we should do everything in our power to stay put in church – to drive down deep relational roots and be an active part what God wants to do through the church.

In my lifetime of going to church I have found that the people who make the effort to get involved, who come to the potlucks and social events, who volunteer to use their gifts and talents – are the ones who drive down deep roots and enjoy the benefits of close relationships. As is true of anything, the more time, effort, and energy you put into something, the more you get out of it. The same is true of church. Once you give up the idea that there is a perfect, ideal church – there's not – and once you come to terms that no one church will be just the way you want it to be – then you can join the best imperfect church and jump in. I like what one person said, "Find the church that you least dislike and join it."

The fifth relationship trait Paul models and encourages is **reciprocity**. Paul did everything he could to restore his relationship with the Corinthians, now he pleads with them to respond to him in the same way. In 6:12 he says, "We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us." In contrast, the Corinthians were giving Paul the cold shoulder and keeping him at a distance. In 6:13 he says, "As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also." The Corinthians had allowed their hearts to become closed to Paul, and now that he has opened wide his heart to them, he asks that they open wide their hearts to him. In 7:2 he says, "Make room for us in your hearts." "Now that I have opened up my heart and told you my side of things, I hope that prompts you to open up your hearts to me."

Most conflicts – I would say the vast majority of them – are due to lack of information or misinformation. We make assumptions without knowing all the facts, or we believe things that are not true because there is no communication. I've often seen small misunderstandings mushroom into big conflicts that could easily be resolved if two people could just sit down, put their pride and hurt feelings aside, and do the hard work of communication until each party is heard and understood. Through the simple act of listening you learn things you never knew, and it changes your perspective. You might still disagree, but you can agree to disagree in love.

The final relationship trait, number six, we see is **optimism**. Despite all the disrespect and cruel things said about him, Paul does not allow bitterness and negativity to take root. In 7:4b he says, “I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.” That’s not a normal response to what someone like Paul has gone through, but he says, “I take great pride in you.” He thinks the best of them. One of the traits of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is that love always hopes. Love refuses to give up on people, but trusts that God will work in their lives. Giving up on people is a form of self-protection – I don’t want to hope too much and then be disappointed – but love hangs in there with people and keeps praying for them, trusting God that things will turn around.

Paul also says he is greatly encouraged, and that in spite of his troubles, his joy knows no bounds. One of the paradoxes of the Christian life is that joy and trouble can exist at the same time. Paul had joy even in the midst of conflict – Jesus had joy even as He went to the cross knowing that many people would be saved through His death. It’s a positive, optimistic attitude that looks beyond the chaos of the moment and trusts that God is in control, and that in the end everything will be okay.

All of these characteristics of love – warmth, openness, transparency, commitment, reciprocity, and optimism – all of these are displayed in God’s love for us...

- When we rebelled and turned our backs on God, He reached out to us with warmth and opened wide His heart of love.
- He spoke frankly and truthfully what we needed to do to be reconciled with Him.
- When we commit our lives to Him, He commits Himself to us, promising to never leave or forsake us, and even when we stray, He lovingly disciplines us to bring us back in the fold.
- As His children He takes great pride in us, and has joy and delight with each step of growth we make.

I’m not sure what your relationships problems are this morning, but I’m sure you have some – everybody does...

- Would you ask God to give you a warm and open heart – having no wall or barrier between yourself and others?
- Perhaps you need to have a conversation with someone – would you pray that God will give you the right heart and the right words – and the supernatural ability to speak the truth in love?
- Maybe God is convicting you to recommit and reestablish a relationship you have neglected... maybe it’s your marriage, maybe it’s a family member, or a relationship with a brother or sister in Christ.
- Maybe someone has reached out to you, but you’ve shut them out, and the Lord is prompting you to make room for them in your heart.
- And in every relationship, God calls each us to joyful optimism – bearing with one another and giving God time to work.