

Gospel Shaped Relationships

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[0 : 00] Well, imagine yourself hurtling down the freeway and suddenly the driver rips the steering wheel off and throws it out the window.

You're out of control. It's going to end badly. That, I think, is a picture of exactly where we're at as a society when it comes to thinking about marriage and relationships.

Some have veered away into believing that relationships and family, maleness and femaleness, can take any form a person chooses.

They'll go on to say that many people, if not most people, will experience several different relationship forms and they'll have perhaps even several different gender expressions over their lifetime.

And they will all be acceptable. Others veer off in another direction, believing that marriage and family is just a cultural invention of men and religion.

[1 : 10] And it's been invented to control and exploit women. And therefore it should be abolished completely. Others steer off in the opposite direction, making family and marriage absolutely essential to their sense of identity and worth as a person.

I've got to be married. I've got to have children. And so here we are, back and forth across the road because we've no longer got a steering wheel.

And the inevitable result is that so many will crash and burn. And as Christians, we've got to live in the middle of this chaos and find a way to navigate that reflects who we are as Christians.

So I want to say to you this morning as I move into this series and open up the series for those who follow after me, I want you to hear that this teaching series is really important because we need the steering wheel of God's word if we are to model gospel-shaped family relationships in the face of this vicious and unrelenting attack that we're part of.

We need to know what's right. We need courage to do what's right. But I also hasten to add that it will be a difficult series.

[2 : 41] Certainly it's going to be difficult for us to present because of our failings in this very area of relationships and family. And it'll be difficult for you to hear for exactly the same reason.

It's always easier to pretend that things are well, isn't it? Than to take ownership of things that aren't right and to work for real change.

And so it'll be difficult to hear, I suspect. But it will also be easily dismissed, I suspect, as being too general to be helpful. So what I mean by that is that so often we come to an issue like family and relationships with very specific issues that are very specific to us and we want answers for those issues.

Those are the burning questions for us. And so then we get frustrated because our burning question isn't immediately answered. And so we write the whole thing off as being irrelevant. Well, all I can say to you this morning is I ask you to stay with us as we lay the solid foundations from which countless real issues might be properly addressed.

[3 : 57] We need the foundations right before we can see how to connect in and answer the specifics. So with that introduction, let's turn to God's word in Genesis 1 and 2.

And I want to just give you a very brief overview of God's design for relationships. And I've set it as a chart there because I want you to see just the opposites as they develop, but hopefully you'll see that yourself as I talk through this.

So God's design for relationships set out in Genesis 1 and 2. And I want to begin by saying this, that our identity, our sense of self, is in being image bearers.

If you look at chapter 1 of Genesis, if you've got your Bible open, chapter 1, verses 26 and 27, very familiar words, but we need to look at them and refresh our memory again of them. Then God said,

let us make man in our image, mankind in our image, after our likeness.

And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heaven and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps over the earth. So God created man in his own image.

[5 : 08] In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. We are made as image bearers.

Our identity comes in the fact that we are to be a reflection of God's character. A reflection of our good God and defined in relation to him.

So we're told there that in the Genesis and creation story that people are mankind, humankind, people are totally unique and distinct among created animals by virtue of being made in God's image.

So what is it then to be made in the image or reflection of God? Well, Genesis 2 highlights four key areas which will come out over the next four weeks. I just want to mention two this morning.

To be a reflection of God primarily is to be made for relationship. So we're in the column on the left now.

[6 : 11] By design, we were made for engagement with God. In Genesis 1 and 2, the picture of engagement there is what's known as the eternal community.

Father, Son, and Spirit. The Trinity existed in harmony before creation. And mankind was made to engage in that eternal community.

To enjoy that eternal community. To fully participate in it with Father, Son, and Spirit. To model that community in all of life's relationships in the context of the world that God has put them in.

And we see also in Genesis 1 and 2, the relationship was characterized by trust and delight and submission. Adam delighted in God. He appreciated that his security and satisfaction and purpose was in relationship with God.

And in chapter 2, he thrived within the functional roles allocated to him by God as God's vice-regent in ruling the world, ruling God's creation.

[7 : 22] And then as we move through chapter 2, we see a particularly interesting thing that being made for a relationship was characterized, these relationships were characterized by a loving complementarity.

Look at chapter 2, verse 18, and you see a really, really amazing thing. Remember that Adam had a unique, special, intimate relationship with God, very direct.

And yet, in verse 18, the Lord God said, it is not good that the man should be alone. Adam enjoyed a unique relationship with God, the Creator.

Yet, for all that, God spoke of Adam's aloneness. Adam needed a relationship that was of the same essence, the same nature as his relationship.

He had a wonderful relationship with God, but it wasn't perfectly reciprocal. Adam needed a relationship, a horizontal relationship of the same essence.

[8 : 42] So, in God's design, chapter 2 of Genesis, in God's design, one became two, and guess what? Two became one again.

It's quite a neat little trick, really. Adam and Eve expressed their strong sense of self, self. Each created, in the image of God, their strong sense of self in a loving complementarity.

And we'll open it up more in the next weeks, but each in that complementarity, each valued sameness. Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.

Each valued sameness in the context of different functional roles. Each benefited from the other, a helper, so that together they could be something which they couldn't be individually in their aloneness.

And they benefited from one another, yet without thought of competing. And we're told then at the beginning of chapter 2 that all these relationships happened in the context of rest or peace.

[9 : 59] When God finished his work of creation, he rested. In other words, God shifted his focus from actual creating to sustaining and enjoying that which he had created.

that's the picture of chapter 2. And so that leads into chapter 2 then. The second idea of being designed is to be a reflection of God in being made for worship.

Being made for relationship but being made secondly for worship. And so again, we picture the harmony of the eternal community, Father, Son and Spirit.

the harmony is modeled through an appropriate response of each of those to the other. That is the definition of harmony. Father, Son and Spirit, different but appropriate response to each, creating this harmony.

So also image bearers were designed to respond appropriately to God as his creatures. And again, this is worship. Worship is simply a response to God.

[11:18] And we see in Genesis chapter 2 that it's an all-of-life response in the garden. Individually, they were to respond appropriately to God as image bearers.

Together, they were to respond appropriately to God as image bearers together. They were thriving happily under his rule, valuing God-ordained distinctions and boundaries.

And they see that in Genesis chapter 2 they were worshipping in their work of tending the garden and ruling the world. That was worship. They were worshipping God in their marriage relationship as they were helpers and complementary of one another.

And I take it that means that worship included their sexual relationships. So in that activity, that aspect of marriage, that also was an appropriate response to how God had made them.

Worship is an all-of-life response. Everything was worship. Everything was God's rest, in other words. So God's rest, when you spell it all out from Genesis chapter 2, is the peace, the harmony, the satisfaction that's enjoyed when God's people live as God designed them to live, as God created them to live.

[12:37] love. In sameness, but indifference. In engagement with God, yet worship of him.

God's rest, in God's rest, in God's rest, in God's rest, in God's rest. In Genesis chapter 3, but of course, all this was ruined.

We move into chapter 3. All this was ruined when rebellion or sin entered God's world. And so the picture we have in Genesis chapter 3, relative to chapter 1 and 2, is that sin grotesquely distorts everything that God had designed.

And so any image bearing or reflection of God, especially in the sense of identity and sense of self, is grotesquely distorted because of sin.

Francis Schaeffer captures it beautifully by saying that sin or rebellion has left people as majestic ruins. We are still image bearers, but so distorted that the best we can say about ourselves is that we're majestic ruins.

[14:05] Our identity and sense of self is just totally distorted. And so the reality described in Genesis 3 is the opposite. of what we see in Genesis 1 and 2. Instead of engagement, there's now detachment from God.

A rebellious humanity has been excluded from participating in God's community, no longer able to relate as God designed. Now the reality is rejection of God, suspicion of his goodness, and open competition for personal sovereignty.

That is, people in our world as we experience it now, cut loose from life as God defined it, cut loose from our identity as God defined it, determined to be God ourselves, determined to set our own course, to be our own rulers.

Oh my goodness. I even scared myself. Determined to create our own version of the good life. love. And that pathway is driven by individualism, exploitation, consumerism, and by that I mean where love has been so distorted that is now expressed as manipulation and exploitation for my own benefit.

[15:22] I do something for you because I sense I will get gain from it personally. And out of that then, we become so ruthless in this pursuit of validation of our identity, validation of self, this distortion, that it makes us attack and wound and demolish others so that we might feel secure in ourselves.

And sometimes that is so aggressive and so determined that our actions seriously impact the way other people have a sense of self.

we put stuff in their head that remains theirs, baggage, and which they struggle with for many years to come, if not for the whole lifetime. And all so we can feel good about ourselves.

And it produces restlessness and loss of peace. See, we're in conflict now. Restlessness is that. It's conflict. conflict. Because we long for something, we still sense deep down that there's something we're longing for, this harmony, this peace, this satisfaction, this sense of identity and self that's easy and fits.

But we can't deliver it. So we long to be accepted by people but we also fear rejection by those who we have failed, by those we've offended in relationship.

[16:58] And that fear, I think, is ultimately, as Larry Crabb would say, fear of rejection by God. It's buried deep within us. We can't necessarily get it all untangled and explained but it's there.

It drives us. You know that fear is a big part of all your relationships. And we live with shame. Knowing that we are exploiting and consuming those we profess to love, yet we cannot help ourselves. We cannot stop ourselves. We're secretly full of shame in their presence and ultimately, again, full of shame when we think of ourselves in the presence of God.

fear. So fear and shame are such big parts of our relationships that often we don't understand why there's such fundamental parts of it.

And all of this distorted identity and sense of self renders us unable to worship in truth or in spirit.

And so, my friends, our worship therefore becomes false.

[18:11] It's distorted. Instead of being a whole of life response which is based on truth, based on how we're designed to be, we actually reduce it and we make our worship a selected response to God on our own terms.

So we take our relationships out and we don't think that the way we conduct ourselves in marriage or as children. We don't think or say that as part of our worship. We don't think our sexual activity is part of our worship.

We reduce it down to something that we feel comfortable with. It's a distortion. We make a part into the whole and we don't have the heart that engages with God.

And so we find it easier to worship self rather than to have ourselves worship God. We find it easier to worship work than to worship God through our work.

We find it easier to worship marriage than to worship God in our marriages. We find it easier to worship family than to worship God in and through our family relationships.

[19:23] We make part of the life into the whole and then think that when we present that to God as a religious action, we have done something worthwhile and pleasing to him. So often our worship has even reduced to singing.

That's often how we think of worship primarily today, isn't it? But deep down we know that cannot work.

So we're left in restlessness. We're left with a lack of satisfaction. We're left with confusion in our identity. And that gets expressed at all sorts of level.

We're left without meaning and purpose in life. And so we struggle all the harder to find meaning and purpose in those things that we think should give us meaning and purpose such as family, such as our relationships.

Blaise Pascal, the philosopher, once said that the doctrine of original sin, which is what we're talking about in Genesis 3, the doctrine of the fall seems an offense to reason when you first come across it.

[20:27] It seems ridiculous to think that people have been changed like this. But he goes on to say, once accepted, it makes the total sense of the human condition.

See, we may not accept the argumentation behind it, but we would all have to agree that we make a mess of relationships. Our expectations for our relationships are rarely delivered.

But the pursuit of our expectations causes enormous trouble and destruction. So we recognize that, and I'm telling you this morning, what's behind all that, whether you believe it or not.

The reality of sins, as Schaeffer says, means that we're majestic ruins. We need to be restored to the original design, reformatted to God's original design so that once again we're a reflection of God's character and a model of this to the world.

My friends, that's why this story has got a really happy, positive outcome. This is the beauty of the gospel. The gospel, in and through the gospel, my image-bearing capacity is restored through Christ so that once again I'm now able to live in my relationships as God designed it to be.

[22:10] The gospel restores my image-bearing capacity by restoring identity and a proper sense of self.

Remember how Adam was defined in relation to God? Now, in the gospel, I am defined, you're defined in relation to Christ. Christ. Turn with me now to Ephesians.

I'm just going to touch down on a few verses here. You can read through Ephesians 4. In fact, the whole of Ephesians is just full of the language of restoration. And you'll see that the ideas that

match up with what's lost in Genesis 3 and pushes back to what was so beautiful, but Genesis 1 and 2.

So in Ephesians chapter 1, verse 3, we'll start there, so we're told again here of engagement with God.

That's part of the restoration. So there was engagement, detachment, now in Christ, engagement again through Jesus. Look at chapter 1, verse 3. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

[23 : 27] And that keeps going there through the verses. It talks about Father, Son, and Spirit. being involved in our restoration so that once again we're engaged in the eternal community.

We now enjoy every spiritual blessing God intended for us when he first created us. Father, Son, and Spirit have combined to completely restore relationship with him.

We see that coming through again in chapter 2. The relationship was characterized by unity and peace. Chapter 2, verses 11 through to 23. I don't have time to stop and you can read it for yourself. Jesus bears our guilt so that we no longer need to fear God.

Jesus turns our shame into honor as we are adopted into God's family as dearly beloved children. we no longer need to fear God's presence. And turn with me to chapter 4, verses 1 to 6, what Joe read a little bit earlier.

[24 : 36] Vertical restoration, that restoration of relationship with God vertically also means a restoration of relationship horizontally. Restoration to peace and unity with every other believer in the same way as we now have peace and unity with Christ.

And we see there that our challenge is not to create this unity that has been created in Christ. Our challenge is simply to express that unity. Because that's our identity.

That's who we are now in the Lord Jesus. And that unity ought to be modeled in all our relationships.

in our actions, in our attitudes, in our desires. So that our desires and actions and attitudes, as it says there, are worthy.

That is, that they truly reflect, that we're authentic. Reflect who we are in Christ. In verse 15, once again, relationships can be driven by truth and love and true complementarity.

[25 : 57] Verses 23 and 24 that was read to us, to renew in the spirit of your minds and to put on the new self created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. we express again truth and love and true complementarity as we help one another get rid of all the signs of the life alienated and detached from God and build in all the signs of the righteous life, the life that's re-engaged with God, that's restored with God, that's changed from the inside out.

Because that showcases our new identity. It showcases and expresses our new sense of self, our true sense of self as we were created to show it.

So there's nothing wrong with being selfish, providing we understand that selfish for us as Christians is a reflection, an authentic reflection of who we are in Jesus.

And as we struggle to demonstrate our new authentic self in Christ, then we are worshipping.

Chapter 5, verse 1 says, be imitators of God as beloved children. I take it that's another type of picture language for worship. that is, respond to God as God is appropriate to his character and his being.

[27 : 44] Chapter 5, verses 8 to 15, we'll probably see those more over the next few weeks, talks about walking as the children of the light. Look at verse 18, verse 8, sorry, of chapter 5.

For at one time you were darkness, but thou you're light in the Lord. You get this contrast between what we were in sin and what we now are in Christ.

Walk, therefore, as children of light and try to discern, verse 10, what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

verse 17, do not be foolish, but understand what the word of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart.

Be your authentic self and that will be true worship. Worship in spirit, engaging with the heart and in truth. A true reflection of who we are in relation to God.

[28 : 57] A true reflection of God's value and worth. A true identity. And as we do all that, we have evidence of the Spirit re-tuning our hearts to express our growing joy and delight with God.

And the inevitable outcome of that will be that our distorted sense of self will give way to a renewed sense of self in Christ.

And that will transform our relationships. And only that will transform our relationships. relationships. So, we need to be gospel shaped in our thinking about family relationships.

But that might not be as obvious as you think. See, without the steering wheel of God's word, we actually won't know how to do relationships as God designed them.

[30 : 05] We won't know how to operate families as God designed them, intended them. We won't even know what a family is, let alone how to make it God honoring. We need the steering wheel of God's word.

Because if we set our course by society, then we can actually all just go home, because society says there's no problem. Our society has totally embraced this distorted identity and self.

And society says, well, actually, there's no real need for change. If you get an issue with me, then your challenge is to accept me as I am. That's what society says.

People just have to accept me and my relationship for what they are. And as Christians, we take that on too easily. We have come to live with dysfunction and pain in our relationships.

And we simply conclude, that's how it's meant to be. That's as good as it can be. That's as good as it can be. But we sort of sidestep a little bit because we then compare our family context to others out there in the wider world.

[31 : 21] And we do it in such a way that we can usually conclude that we're doing very well as families relative to other people. But so often we don't look vertically to see how our family measures up, how our family relationships measure up in terms of God's intention for us.

So we live with this sense of well-being, this acceptance of where we're at in our relationships, but it's far from worship.

We need to see that family and relationships are part of our worship. And you can see through Ephesians 4 and 5, we'll come back to some of these details, but that needs to, we need to be our authentic selves in terms of how we love one another.

We need to reflect who we are in Christ in terms of how we repent when we mess up in our relationships, and we will. We need to take ownership, proper ownership.

It will reflect how we offer forgiveness and handle forgiveness in our relationships. Not a fluffy, easy thing that just says, well, okay, all right, let's just pretend it hasn't happened, nothing's really been fixed, but let's just pretend everything's good.

[32 : 39] That's not reflection of Christ. And yet, that's so often what we mistake and put forward as forgiveness. We need to be gospel-shaped.

And then the other extreme, sometimes as Christians, we have too high a view of family and relationships. I said early on in the introduction, sometimes we as Christians make family an idol and marriage an idol.

We make it our goal in life to be married, to have children. rather than understand that the primary one-flesh relationship we have now is with Christ. It's Christ who defines us and gives us our identity, not whether we're married and whether we have children.

And I think that's why, I think that partly explains why divorce rates among Christians are just as high as they are in the non-Christian world. We're so committed to finding identity in marriage and family relationships in our children that if we fail in one then we break one marriage, we break one family and we start again because that's what we're chasing.

Friends, we need to learn that it's not going to ever be a biological relationship that will satisfy us ultimately, but Christ. So let's pray over the next six weeks.

[33 : 58] Let's pray for new exposure, new challenge from God's word so we might identify areas where we have lost gospel shape or perhaps we're never gospel shaped in the first place.

And let's commit to struggle for real change so we might be authentic in our identity and sense of self as we relate to one another. Let me pray.

Help us, Lord, to hear your word. It will be difficult, difficult to present and difficult to hear because Lord, hearing means the risk of exposure and exposure pushes us to the challenge of change.

Lord, keep us, I pray, above all else from simply pretending that things are well rather than struggling for real change. Amen.

Amen. Amen.