

The Remarkable Importance of Relationships

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Date: 12 October 1997

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on October the 12th 1997. The preacher is Hilary Roth. The sermon is entitled The Remarkable Importance of Relationships and is taken from Matthew chapter 18 verses 15 to 22. Relationships are important. You may think that it really doesn't matter how you relate to that person sitting next to you in the church pew or that one who is sitting in the desk next to you at work.

You may think that all that matters is that you do your jobs well. Because low on the priorities of most people is that broken relationship that never seems to get mended. Who really has the time to think about those unkind harsh words that were said between you and a church member that resulted in that cold awkward silence between you?

We have too much to do to stop and to consider relationships. But relationships were important to Matthew. They were so important that he gave detailed instructions for those times in which our relationships turn sour.

If someone sins against you or treats you unjustly, you are instructed to go and to confront the person.

[1 : 49] If that person hears you and understands your hurt, then you have regained, you have gained a true friendship.

If, however, that brother or sister that has offended you will not listen to you, then you are to go again, taking one or two others to witness what goes on.

And if the offender refuses to listen to them, we are then to tell it to the church. And if the offender refuses to listen to the church, then we are to let it rest.

And we are to let the offender be to us, as we are told in verse 17, as a Gentile or a tax collector. These are two groups of people a good Jew would try to avoid.

But this is a lot of energy. This is a lot of work. So why not think of those who have wronged us as a Gentile or a tax collector from the beginning?

[3 : 15] And bypass all this running around. Why do we go to all this effort? Because Jesus said relationships are very important.

Because Jesus said that how we live together in this life has eternal consequences. And that puts a whole new dimension on that church disagreement or the office squabble.

Nina had always been an active woman. Every morning she thanked God for her health and her energy.

And because Nina enjoyed people so much, she made it a point of visiting at least one sick person a week. She played bridge once a week.

She had joined the senior citizens class. She enjoyed lots of activities in the church. And every Tuesday morning, Nina would get up early and tidy up her unit.

[4 : 38] She would make fresh cinnamon rolls for her Bible study group. And she looked forward to the smile on her friends' faces as they stepped through the kitchen door.

And took a deep breath and smelled that wonderful smell of the cinnamon rolls and the fresh brew coffee. It had become a sort of a tradition. In the evenings, Nina knitted and crocheted for her grandchildren and her children.

And then one particular morning, as she woke, she thanked God for his creation.

She thanked God for her health and her energy. And for her family and friends. And for the gift of being his child. She looked forward to her day.

Because this afternoon, the women of the church were meeting. Her cinnamon rolls were due to be out of the oven at one o'clock. Which was perfect timing.

[5 : 41] Because while they cooled, Nina changed her clothes and got ready. She parked her car next to the vicar's spot. And carried in two pans of cinnamon rolls into the kitchen.

And then when she returned with the third pan, Rebecca was just setting her plate of cakes down on the counter. Rebecca looked at Nina with her third pan of fresh cinnamon rolls and said, What are you trying to do?

Take over the women's group too? Nina felt as if a knife had been stabbed in her back. She was hurt and she was angry.

But she wasn't going to give Rebecca the satisfaction of knowing how badly she felt. So Nina ignored Rebecca for the rest of the afternoon.

And then she worked on the other side of the kitchen when they were serving afternoon tea. Nina actually sat on the opposite side of the church next Sunday.

[6 : 52] The opposite side from Rebecca. And then a week passed and Nina was still feeling hurt and angry. So she told her friend.

And then when it came to the Bible study, she told them of the incident. And it didn't take long before the whole church knew that Nina and Rebecca weren't getting along.

And so everyone was careful not to put them in the same group. Not to put them on the same committee. The church did their best to keep Nina and Rebecca separated.

No one wanted those hard feelings to surface. The longer they ignored each other, the deeper the chasm grew.

The new minister came over to visit Nina one day. They had a good time looking at photographs of children and grandchildren. And during the visit, the minister mentioned that she'd heard that Nina had made the best cinnamon rolls in town.

[8 : 02] Nina was a bit embarrassed, but she was rather pleased at the same time. And then the minister went on and asked her if she would make enough cinnamon rolls for the youth events that she was planning.

I'm expecting quite a few to turn up. She said, would you make three pans of cinnamon rolls? And then she noticed Nina's hesitation.

Well, if three's too much, she said. Oh, no, said Nina. It's just that I haven't made three pans of cinnamon rolls since the last time I brought them to the women's meeting.

And then tears started to well up in Nina's eyes. And she told the minister what had happened between her and Rebecca. She talked about the hurt and about the anger and about the feeling as if a knife had been stabbed in her back and the pain that was so intense.

And the minister asked when this had all happened. Eight years ago, she said. Have you and Rebecca talked about what had happened?

[9 : 18] The minister asked. Oh, no, Nina replied. She hasn't talked to me since. And she's even stopped coming to the church activities.

She knows what she did. She knows that it hurt so much. Well, it took a long time for the minister to finally convince Nina to go and talk to Rebecca.

She agreed only after the minister offered to go with her. And that night, Nina had trouble sleeping. She didn't really want to talk to Rebecca.

It had happened so long ago. Why couldn't she forget it? And then when morning finally came, she couldn't eat breakfast. She tried to read the newspapers but couldn't concentrate.

The morning seemed to drag by. Her head ached. Her stomach was turning. And when she reached for her coffee cup, she noticed her fingers were trembling. Ten o'clock, the minister picked up Nina.

[10 : 27] The ride to Rebecca's was very quiet. She really didn't want to do this. How are you supposed to tell someone? They have hurt you.

Rebecca invited them in and led her guests into the living room. The air was thick. If anyone had walked into that room at that moment, they would be able to feel the vibrations.

The minister looked from Nina to Rebecca before she broke the silence. Rebecca, do you remember the last time you served a church?

It's been about eight years now. And Rebecca turned her head slightly and then she stared at a spot on the floor.

Yes, she said. Yes, she said. I remember. I'd been baking all morning. I got up early to make a special pan of slice.

[11 : 28] I was looking forward to trying out this new recipe. And while it baked, I thought I'd do my washing. But when I got back into my kitchen, there was smoke coming out of the oven.

And my slice was black. All I had time to do was to mix up a packet of cake mix and to take it to church. I was disappointed and I was embarrassed.

And that's when I saw you, Nina. And as Rebecca looked up at Nina, tears were running down her face. And she said, I'm sorry.

Nina reached over and she squeezed her hand. I'm sorry too, she said. In Rebecca's kitchen that morning, over the coffee and the cake, there was a transformation.

The coffee and the cake was transformed into a sacramental meal as Nina and Rebecca and the minister experienced forgiveness and reconciliation.

[12 : 45] They talked about their gardens and they talked about their families. They laughed and drank lots of coffee and tea. And Nina invited Rebecca to come with her to the next women's meeting.

Why and what should we do when another Christian has sinned against us? Or caused us to stumble?

Jesus gave us his instructions in our passage today. Firstly, he said in verse 15, Keep the matter private.

Go to the person who has sinned. Speak to him or her alone. It's possible that this was not done deliberately. That this person doesn't realize that they've hurt you.

But even if they did do it deliberately, our own attitude of care and love will help that person apologize.

[13 : 58] But above all, we are to go with the idea of regaining or winning our brother and sister, not winning an argument.

Because it's quite possible to win an argument and to lose our brother and sister. We must have that spirit of gentleness when we speak to or try to restore our brother and sister.

And we read in Galatians 6 verse 1, My friends, if anyone is detected in transgression, you who have received the spirit should restore such a one in the spirit of gentleness.

Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. We must go about, we must not go about condemning, condemning the person or spreading gossip.

We must lovingly seek to help in the same way as we would want help if the situation was reversed. That word restore in Galatians is a Greek word, a Greek medical word, which means to set a broken bone.

[15 : 29] We just need to think of the patience and the tenderness that takes. Secondly, Jesus says in verse 16, Ask for help from others.

If that person refuses to make things right, then we have to feel free to share the facts as we see them with two dependable Christians.

It's very helpful to share it at this time. We actually ask them for their prayers and for their thoughts. because after all, we might be in the wrong.

And then if it's considered that it is right to go ahead, we can go to that person and try once again to regain our brother or sister.

not only can others assist in the prayers and in the persuasion, but they are also witnesses to the church of the truth of what is said.

[16 : 44] When sin is not dealt with honestly, it always spreads. And now, what was once a matter between two people has now grown to involve four or five.

Thirdly, Jesus says in verse 17, Ask the church for help. Remember, what we want is not the winning of an argument but the winning of our brother and sister.

What started out as a private problem between two people is now out in the open for the whole church to see. Church discipline is a neglected ministry these days.

And yet, it's taught very clearly here and it's taught in 1 Corinthians 5, in 2 Thessalonians 3, in 2 Timothy 2, in Titus 3.

Because just as children in our own homes need discipline, so God's children in the church need discipline. And so if by the time the matter comes to the whole church, the person does not have a changed mind or has not repented, then there must be discipline.

[18 : 20] The person cannot then be treated like a spiritual brother or sister because they have now forfeited that position.

They can only be treated as one on the outside of the church. not hated, but not held in close fellowship.

Immediately before our passage that we read today, Jesus has just taught in the parable of the lost sheep how much God highly values every single one of his children.

And when one of them goes astray he will not rest until that lost child is found. His will which we read in verse 14, his will is that one of these little ones should be lost.

Not one of these little ones should be lost. And nor should it be the will of us Christians that even one of our brothers or sisters should be lost. When anyone is lost to the church or lost to our fellowship, a most valuable treasure is lost.

[19 : 50] And like our heavenly father, we should not be content until they are restored. failed. Failing to help confront sin actually brings about spiritual downfall.

A person who believes they are too loving to confront their brother or sister in Christ is really deceived. they are not too loving but are too uncaring.

The loving Christian like our loving heavenly father and like loving parents want the proper discipline for those that they love.

And we read about that in Hebrews chapter 12 verses 5 to 11. But in the eyes of the world, even in the eyes of many Christians, confronting is considered unloving.

But discipline given in the right way expresses the deepest kind of love. Because love that winks at sin or that is more concerned for the superficial calm of the church than the spiritual purity is not God's kind of love.

[21 : 29] Love that tolerates sin is not love at all, but worldly and selfish sentimentality.

now as we move on to verses 18 to 20.

When the church disciplines a member, it actually has to discipline itself. and in discipline itself, it gets itself in order.

And this is why Jesus adds these words in verses 18, 19, and 20. He adds these words about authority, about prayer, and about fellowship.

We cannot discipline others if we are not disciplined ourselves. so whatever we bind, meaning permit, whatever we bind in the church must first have been permitted by God.

[22 : 44] The church is under the authority of God's word. Church discipline is not a group of Christian policemen and women throwing their weight around.

Rather it means God exercising his authority in and through the local body to restore his children. And there must also be prayer we read in verse 19.

That word agree in the Greek actually gives us our English word symphony. The church must agree in prayer as it looks to discipline a member.

it's through prayer and God's word that we work out his will in a particular matter. And finally there must be fellowship in Christ we read in verse 20.

We must recognize his presence with us. Speaking the truth in love as we read in Ephesians is God's standard.

[24 : 01] Speaking the truth in love is God's standard. If we practice love without truth it's hypocrisy.

But if we try to have truth without love it is cruelty. Jesus always taught the truth in love.

But some Christians do not speak the truth in love. But they use a person's faults as a weapon to attack with and not a tool to build with.

God will help to do not is this happens it will result only in greater disharmony and greater disagreement.

Now we move on to verses 21 to 22. We all know that Peter made some very serious mistakes.

[25 : 11] so it doesn't surprise us here how he was so sure that he would be the one that was sinned against.

It doesn't occur to him that he might one day be the sinner himself. But we know Peter and we know that he really understood our tendency to commit sin be forgiven than before long commit the same sin or some equally some other sin equally is bad.

And so after listening to Jesus teaching about discipline in the church Peter wonders how many times Christians were expected to forgive those in the church who persisted in doing wrong.

How many times should they be allowed to repent and to be restored to the fellowship? But this was Peter's second mistake.

He asked for limits and he asked for measurement. But where there is love there can be no limits.
[26 : 31] Peter thought he was showing great faith and great love when he offered to forgive at least seven times. After all the rabbis had taught that three times was enough.

And Jesus replied 77 times. Which must have come as a shock to Peter we couldn't keep count ourselves of that many offenses against us.

And that was exactly the point that Jesus was making. Love keeps no record of wrongs. We read in 1 Corinthians 13.

Love keeps no record of wrongs. forgiveness. And by the time we have forgiven that many times we have developed the habit of forgiving.

But Jesus was not advertising careless or shallow forgiveness. Christian love is not blind.

[27 : 44] And the forgiveness that Jesus wants is the forgiveness that he taught us early on in the passage in verses 15 to 20.

Forgiveness is the key to the spiritual unity of the church because forgiveness is the key to love. Forgiveness is the key to all meaningful relationships. It is only forgiveness that can break down the barriers that sin continually and inevitably build between people.

And Christians need to forgive because we ourselves need forgiveness. We are spiritual children and like all children we are weak, we are selfish, we are disobedient and we regularly need forgiveness both from God and from each other.

Forgiving is a give and take issue of life. a person who forgives is a person who reflects God because nothing shows God's love as much as his forgiveness.

[29 : 17] Amen. Amen. Amen.

Thank you.

Thank you.

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Thank you.

[32 : 19] Thank you.

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[34 : 49] Thank you.

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[37 : 19] Thank you.

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[39 : 49] Thank you.

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[42 : 19] Thank you.

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