

Repairing Relationships

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Date: 15 October 2016

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[0 : 0 0] Today, as being already mentioned, I get to give the last sermon that will be preached from this point right here. That could actually be something that's a bit painful for you to think about. I just want to say that it's okay to find change difficult. So if you're feeling a little bit nervous about the big shift sideways, I want to say that's okay to feel like that and we love you.

We're praying and hoping that the shift will be something God uses to bring more people into his kingdom, to see more people come to know the hope and love of the gospel. And so it is my prayer that God comforts you in your discomfort, but also that he uses that discomfort for a significant purpose of seeing people come to know him. But let me pray and then let's get stuck into today's message.

Father God, we thank you for your word. We thank you that you're a God who speaks and we ask today that it would be your voice that we hear loudest. We ask that you would give us the wisdom that we seek, that we would live in light of who you are and particularly in the area of relationships, God, that we might honour you. Amen. When I was in youth group, which is getting further and further behind me, we used to sing a song called All Day. I'm not sure that this song would make it through the song selection process here at St Paul's and that might be a good thing. But there was one line in the song in particular that we sung, which went something like, I don't care what they say about me, it's all right. I don't care what they think about me, it's all right. They'll get it one day. Now, I think the point of the line is they'll understand one day, but there's this group of us as teenagers that would enthusiastically be singing, they're going to get it one day. You know, it's great that we're following Jesus. If they dislike us and pick on us, they're going to get theirs. Now, again, I'm not sure that's the point of the song, but sadly, there was a whole bunch of teenagers in the youth group I went to enthusiastically cheering about the judgment of God on anyone who would oppose us. Now, for the past two weeks, we've been looking at friendship, looking at what it looks like to be a wise friend.

We looked even earlier on in the series at family and relationship between parents and children, between spouses. But the reality of relationships, friendship and all the other ones as well, is that they don't always work out the way that we want them to. People let us down, we get hurt, relationships get damaged. And so the question is, what do we do then? What do we do once the relationship already has issues? Now, I'm sure that you can think of a relationship in your life that is not what it once was, not what you wish it was. It could be with a son or a daughter, a brother or a sister, a parent, a spouse, a friend, a neighbour. What do you do once it's damaged? When we've been hurt, how do we live well through that pain? How do we move forward? Do you ever find yourself, maybe not singing it like I did, but thinking that sentiment, they'll get it one day. Justice will be done and it will be sweet when it is.

Now, I mean, we're probably a bit more subtle about those feelings and maybe we don't declare them out loud, although maybe we do. Maybe you're unashamed in your desire for revenge. I'm sorry, I mean justice.

[3 : 34] But what does wisdom say into the pain? What does wisdom say into that damaged relationship? What does it look like to move forward in a way that actually honours God? Do we cut and run? Do we walk away, cut our losses, forget about the relationship? Proverbs calls us to repair relationships.

And I choose that word very carefully. Repairing as distinct from restoring. Now, restoration might be a great outcome, but it's not always going to be wise to return to the same relationship or the same person in the same way. The damage might be a good reason and might be wise to actually not pursue that relationship in the same way. Repairing could even include the possibility of ending a relationship.

But I'm going to talk about that a little bit more later on. But repairing is what wisdom calls for. So how? How do you repair a damaged relationship? And I think Proverbs wants to suggest at least three steps for us. First one, we need to remove ourselves from the throne.

Our hearts are incredibly well trained at self-justification. So we're pretty good at explaining our weaknesses and our failings as, you know, part of the deal. We give ourselves grace, but at the same time, we unwaveringly hold other people to a standard that we can't meet on our own.

You know, when we get it wrong, it's understandable. But when they get it wrong, it's inexcusable. We're very passionate about justice, except of course, when that justice would mean that we're on the receiving end. And we see ourselves in a different category to other people.

[5 : 32] We like to place ourselves above them. And anger and hurt flow out of that sense of superiority. They come from a place where we look at the person who's hurt us and we respond with something like, I would never do that. I would never do what they did.

You know, it's only actually possible to stay angry with someone as long as you think you're superior to them. It's only actually possible to stay angry as long as you see yourself as somebody who is better than them.

As long as you look at them as worse, you're going to put yourself in the dangerous position of justifying your anger and even your hatred towards them as a good and right response.

Now, hatred might sound a bit strong for the way that you feel, but maybe it doesn't. Maybe that's exactly how you feel. But you've got to understand when the Bible talks about hatred, what it's getting at is the sense of ill will.

It's that attitude that takes a bit of delight out of them getting their just desserts. It's that attitude that takes enjoyment out of their misfortune.

[6 : 50] And it thinks, you know, whatever happens to them, whatever bad they have to deal with in life, it's probably fair enough. What we've done is we've taken an issue within a person and we've exaggerated it to make that the sum total of the person.

So if they lie to you, they lied and they are a liar. But if you lie, you're complex.

There's reasons. It's understandable. There's background. There's context. That's the sentiment of superiority. It's a heart that delights in and desires judgment against those who have hurt us.

That says they'll get it one day. With a smile. But listen to Proverbs 24, 17. Do not gloat when your enemy falls.

When they stumble, do not let your heart rejoice. Or the Lord will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from them. Our judgment of people, our sense of superiority, our refusal to give them the same grace we give ourselves could actually turn God's wrath away from people.

[8 : 11] Do you know why? Because when God looks at that situation, what we are doing, the bitterness in our own hearts, the hatred that we have towards these people is just as displeasing to God as whatever it was that was done to us in the first place.

We're sitting on this throne thinking that we are somehow superior in character whilst doing something which is deeply dishonouring to God. When we sit over people, when we pass judgment on people, we don't just demote them below us, but we actually remove God from where he belongs as well.

We actually demote him. The throne that we're sitting on is his throne. He's the only one who has the right to judge, and yet we have decided that we should sit there.

The Bible teaches clearly in the Old and New Testament that vengeance belongs to God. It's his job. He's the only one who is pure enough and holy enough and just enough that he can sit in that seat.

And as soon as you put yourself there, you take a role that you are not equipped for and you are unworthy of. If we want to repair damaged relationships, we need to begin by taking ourselves off that throne.

[9 : 34] We need to begin by resisting that natural inclination of our hearts which self-justifies and says, they're bad, I'm complicated.

Secondly, we need to release people from liability. Have a look at Proverbs 24 verse 28.

Do not testify against your neighbour without cause. Would you use your lips to mislead? Do not say, I'll do to them as they have done to me. I'll pay them back for what they did.

See, the natural outworking of sitting on the throne in a position of superiority is to demand payment, is to exact revenge. It bears fruit in this sense that we feel entitled.

We feel entitled to justice. We feel entitled to revenge. Payback in our culture, in our hearts, is seen as something that is honourable.

[10 : 35] Not just valid, but desirable. When we are wronged, when those we care about are wronged, the immediate inclination of our heart is that whoever has wronged them gets what they deserve.

That's our starting point because we are sitting from a place where we're above them. Where their failing is all of them. Our failings is just a small part of us. But Proverbs says no.

Proverbs 17.9 says, See, sometimes we mask our desire for revenge.

We get a bit savvy and subtle with it in the form of holding a grudge. So face to face, we feign forgiveness. We superficially act like everything is okay, like there's no issue.

But deep down, we're still very angry. Still very bitter. And so we keep reminding everybody else what happened. Face to face, it doesn't come up.

[11 : 38] We don't talk about that issue. But we slander. We gossip. So that even though we haven't confronted them, we make sure they pay what they owe in the form of character assassinating them.

In the form of making everybody else know just how bad they are. Wisdom repairs relationships by releasing people from liability.

By not demanding payment. It causes us to actually cover an offence. It repeats it in Proverbs 19.11. A person's wisdom yields patience. It is to one's glory to overlook an offence.

Now, we need to be really clear here. What do we mean when we say cover an offence? That's not the same as ignoring an offence or pretending an offence didn't happen.

It's not playing down an offence as if somehow it's less painful. Pain is real. Where there is an offence, there is hurt. There is damage.

[12 : 43] There is emotional and relational debt. And if you release somebody from having to pay that debt, then it goes somewhere. It doesn't just evaporate.

Somebody has to pay the debt. And the call in these verses is for us to pay it. The idea of covering an offence is not like hiding it.

It's like that sense of you're in a restaurant with a bunch of friends and a bill arrives. And everybody owes a piece of this bill. But you put your hand up and insist, no, no, no, I'll cover this.

It's that sense of covering. I will own this debt. I will deal with this debt. I will take it. Even though it's not mine, I will choose to bear it. That's what it means when it says cover an offence.

It means you choose to wear the cost in a way that releases the other people. Now, if you say at the table, I'll cover it and then send out emails the next morning with itemised bills and interest accounts for how much people owe you, you haven't covered it.

[13 : 49] To cover an offence is to actually take the debt, own it, deal with it, pay with it, and move on. It's gone. It's done. To cover an offence is to release a person from what they owe you.

They might owe you an apology. They might owe you some change in character, some change in behaviour. Whatever it is, repairing the relationship is only possible when you make the wise decision about what you can control.

And the only thing you control in a damaged relationship is this. Do I demand revenge? Or do I make the choice to release them from what they owe?

I wanted to share with you briefly about my own relationship with my dad. Now, I want to do this gently. I don't want to dishonour my dad. I have shared stories from my childhood before, and many of you will know that my family relationships generally are somewhat damaged, but probably most specifically with my dad, since I was about 14.

There's been points over the journey of my life where I've thought, I'm going to fix this. I'm going to repair this. We've had some fairly pointed conversations, my dad and I, but for the most part, it's still a damaged relationship.

[15 : 17] As I started repairing this week, it was the first relationship that popped into my head. And as I reflected on particularly these first two things, I began to get a bit of a picture of why.

And unsurprisingly, the issue wasn't in my dad, it was in me. I still feel that there are things that my dad has done to me that hurt me. That hasn't changed.

There is still some feelings that I'm processing. I've been sitting in this for six days, but I feel like this will be a journey for longer than that. But the issue has been that I have had an expectation of my dad.

I think I've even said out loud, I would never do what he did. And every time I've sat down with him to have a conversation, I've had an expectation of what he needed to do for me to be able to walk away and say, this is fixed.

An apology, an ownership of fault, some acknowledgement of the pain that other people have had to deal with that he hasn't. But as I was reflecting, I realised that nothing was fixed despite the many conversations that we've had.

[16 : 35] Because reality is I was still sitting on a throne over him. I was still passing judgement on him and I still felt like he owed me. Now you've got to understand that releasing somebody from what they owe you, especially when we're talking about a relational hurt, is not going to be easy.

This is not two boxes you're going to tick off on the way home in a quick conversation this afternoon. You can wallpaper over it with superficial niceness. That's what my family does. We're all going to be together for Christmas and nobody will talk about anything substantial.

It'll still be okay. We'll talk about things. We'll talk about football. We'll talk about what's happening with the kids. But it will be superficial. And then in private, in the little one-on-one conversations, the factions in our family will have conversations about what we really think.

That's not releasing anyone. To release them would be to let it go. To stop talking about it. To stop repeating it.

To let go of my right, my entitlement to pay back. It's not easy. But it's wisdom.

[17 : 53] And it's the path to repairing the relationship. And it's what's best for you. It's what's best for me. If you keep carrying some need in you, something that you require from this person who has hurt you, then most of the damage is going to be in you.

Most of the consequence will be internal. Now, I'm going to make a generalisation based on my own heart and my own experience, and you can decide how well this fits you.

I think that many of us see as the best case scenario when there's a damaged relationship, where there's substantial hurt, the best case scenario is to walk away and end the relationship.

Cut and run. We minimise the hurt with phrases like, I don't care about them anymore, it's a non-issue. But we need to be mindful that when we do that, often the relationship has continued.

It's just doing us damage beneath the surface now. We're pretending it's not, but the pain and hurt is still there. Now, I put end the relationship in inverted commas, because so long as you're carrying hurt, as long as you're carrying anger and bitterness, you're still carrying the relationship.

[19 : 18] And so not only have you not repaired the damage, what you've done now is camouflaged what's causing damage so that it's going to be even more difficult for you to deal with later in life. You've said it's not an issue you've moved on, but your heart is still being impacted by that person and what they did to you.

If you find yourself still talking about what someone did to you, still angry about it, still secretly delighting in their misfortune, then it hasn't ended for you.

It's still there. And it still needs to be repaired. Now, it might need to be repaired so that you can fully and finally end it.

This is what I was talking about at the beginning. It might need to be repaired so that you can draw a line and walk away. But until it's repaired, it won't end.

It'll still be a source of pain and damage for you. Now, I just want to make it clear that this doesn't necessarily mean you need to have a face-to-face conversation with everybody who's ever hurt you. I don't know if you've noticed, but so far the two steps that Proverbs has given us don't require you to converse with anyone except for God.

[20 : 34] You need to remove yourself from the throne. It's not impacting them. And you need to release them from liability. They might not think they owe you anything, so that releasing is going to be something that you do internally.

But Proverbs pushes us one step further. To repair relationships, you've got to remove yourself from the throne.

You've got to release them from liability. And lastly, you need to overcome evil with good. Proverbs 25, 21 says, If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat.

If he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head and the Lord will reward you. See, wisdom is calling us to shift drastically the way that we view these people that have hurt us.

We need to look at them as someone to be loved, not someone who owes us. That's why we need to first remove ourselves from the judgment seat, because when we're looking down, love will not be the first emotion.

[21 : 40] So that we stop looking at ourselves from this false position of superiority, and then we can begin to see them as just like us, created by God, in need of grace, as part of the command that God has given us to love our enemies, to love our neighbours.

If we want to repair relationships, we need to cross over from you owe me to I want to serve you. From delighting in their misfortune, delighting in the negativity in their life, to actually desiring their good.

Say that again. Understand how drastic that is. To go from delighting in their pain and misfortune to desiring their good.

Now I think most of us would look at that and write that off. We were aiming for the middle, where at least we stop delighting and just don't care. But that's not what wisdom calls for.

It says, if your enemy is hungry, give him food. If he's thirsty, give him drink. Love them. Paul quotes this part of Proverbs in Romans 12, which Deb read out for us, where he says, do not repay anyone evil for evil.

[23 : 03] Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, it is mine to avenge.

I will repay, says the Lord. On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Love people who don't deserve it. Do good to those who do evil to you.

Overcome evil with good. Now, one little side note on confrontation. Look at verse 18 with me a little bit closer.

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you. Two things. Firstly, sometimes confronting someone who's wronged you is good and right.

[24 : 15] Proverbs actually explicitly says that. In Proverbs 27, we looked at it a few weeks ago. Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

But now, it's important to see that confrontation, if it's necessary, and it won't always be. There are some things that you can just let go of and move on.

But if it's necessary, it needs to flow out of those first two steps. If we confront people with a prescribed, here's what you must do, then we're still sitting on the throne.

And if it's even slightly motivated by a desire to pay them back for what they did to us, then it's not motivated by love. Now, that confrontation might have an outcome, but it won't be a repaired relationship.

Even if they apologise, even if they adjust their behaviour, in the process, you've actually damaged yourself. Because what you've done is you've affirmed your place as judge in the relationship.

[25 : 20] You've affirmed your position as the one who is superior. You've exacted what was owed to you because you were entitled to it, and you've lost sight of the fact that you were both accountable to Jesus.

And the second thing on confrontation is you can't control other people. Did you catch that in verse 18? If it's possible.

As far as it depends on you, you actually can't control other people. Some people aren't going to ask for a fixed relationship. Some people don't think they need a fixed relationship.

Let alone your forgiveness. And so even if you were to confront them, they might disagree. They might see things differently. You may make no ground and you don't have the power to change that.

What you do have power over is how you feel about them. The one choice that you get is to decide whether or not you will cover the offence, bear the cost, or hold a grudge and wear the consequences.

[26 : 28] And those consequences aren't just for them. They're for you as well. Relationships can be repaired if we are willing to remove ourselves from the throne, release people from liability and overcome evil with good.

Simple, right? Not even close. Like I said, I'm six days into processing this with my dad, which, if I'm honest, is a relationship that I would have said was repaired because we'd had the confrontation.

This helps me intellectually know how it's supposed to work. It helps me know the steps I'm supposed to take, but it doesn't change how I feel because of what was done to me.

It doesn't minimize the hurt. I mean, the kind of forgiveness that we're talking about here isn't just an intellectual decision. It's not just a choice, I'll bear the cost or I'll bear a grudge.

There actually needs to be a move in our heart to shift us from anger and bitterness towards forgiveness and grace. There needs to be a shift in our heart, but how do you do that?

[27 : 42] Well, look to wisdom. God alone has the right to judge. Vengeance is his and he will give it.

It is his justice. In his perfection, he will crush sins and rebellion. But instead of crushing those who have opposed him, he chose to bear the cost.

He chose to take vengeance. Vengeance that was his to give, he chose to wear on himself. Isaiah 53 says it incredibly. He says, surely, just talking about Jesus, surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering.

Yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him and afflicted. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was on him and by his wounds we are healed.

We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. In the cross, vengeance is poured out on Jesus for our sin, for our iniquity.

[29 : 04] It's our punishment that he takes. Vengeance is God's to give. And yet for us, he takes it on himself.

He covers the offense. He bears the weight and he offers forgiveness to you for free. Free to you, but at the highest cost to him.

When you look at the cross, when you look at what Jesus has done for you, it is hard to stand over others as if somehow they are inferior.

As if somehow you are entitled. In light of the incredible forgiveness that was purchased with the blood of Jesus, our hearts are not only grateful, but they can also begin to be grace giving.

When you weigh what it's going to cost you to forgive someone, when you weigh the difficulty that will be there trying to repair a relationship and it will be difficult and it will be costly, when you weigh that in light of what God has done for you, what seems impossible begins to be possible.

[30 : 24] The cross humbles us, but at the same time gives us a deep security and peace because in Jesus we're loved even though we don't deserve it.

The superiority we have towards people is a heart issue. The liability that we hold people to is a heart issue. The love that we're called to is a heart issue.

And the only thing that could possibly shift a heart is God's love for you shown in Jesus. How do you repair your damaged relationship?

You remove yourself from the throne. You release them from the liability. You overcome evil with good and that is only possible in light of God's grace to us in Jesus.

Let's pray. Father God, we want to bring before you relationships in our life that right now are damaged.

[31 : 35] we want to acknowledge that we have contributed to that damage. We want to acknowledge that the inclination of our heart is to justify ourselves and condemn others.

But God, we want to ask that you would give us eyes to recognize your grace to us. We want to ask that you would enable us to see people in light of the love that you have shown to us.

to see ourselves right as desperately in need of your forgiveness. Father, we want to ask that you would enable us to show the grace that we have been shown.

That you would shift our hearts, give us such security in your love for us that we are able to love and desire the good of those who have hurt us. Those who don't deserve it.

Father, we want to ask that you would repair relationships so that people may see in the way that we love and forgive one another and those around us just a hint of the incredible love and forgiveness that you show us.

Father, we thank you for Jesus. We thank you for loving us even though we don't deserve it. We thank you for loving us in spite of our weakness and failure.

[32 : 54] We thank you for loving us at our worst and giving us the deep confidence that you will always love us. Father, please consume us with a gratitude for all that you have done, with the security that comes from your love that we might be messengers of grace in the world that you have placed us in.

Amen.