

Relationships



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Samuel 25; Eph. 4:1–3; 1 Pet. 3:9–12; Luke 17:3, 4; 23:34; James 5:16.*

Memory Text: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets’ ” (*Matthew 7:12, NIV*).

An experienced urban evangelist used to organize stress management seminars as an introduction to evangelistic meetings in cities. He had devised a simple survey in which he asked the audience to list four or five things that caused them the most stress. Workers grouped the answers in general categories (health, money, work, relationships, etc.). Before the count was completed, one worker saw that the speaker already had a prepared set of transparencies to discuss “relationships” as the number one source. When questioned, the pastor explained that the results had always been the same: bad relationships always came up as the primary cause of stress.

Whether problems with spouse, children, boss, work associate, neighbor, friend, or enemy, people tend to be the principal stressor. In contrast, when relationships are positive, they are a powerful source of satisfaction. This seems consistent across geography and culture. People make us happy, or people make us miserable.

That’s why this week we’ll spend some time focusing on the important topic of relationships and what the Bible teaches us about them.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 22.*

Completely Humble and Gentle

Read Ephesians 4:1–3. Why do you think Paul connects humility, gentleness, and patience with good relationships and unity? Recall examples of your own experience in which the above attitudes have made a positive impact on relationships.

Read 1 Samuel 25. What can we learn from the actions of Abigail and David regarding proper behavior in difficult and tense situations?

The story of David, Nabal, and Abigail provides an excellent example of successful social interaction. Results vary significantly depending on how individuals present themselves—as superiors, as equals, or as humble friends or associates.

David sent his soldiers to Nabal with a fair request. “We have protected your men and your property; give us whatever you can find” (*1 Sam. 25:7, 8, author’s paraphrase*). But Nabal didn’t know about kindness or diplomacy. We are told that he was a harsh and evil man. Other translations use terms such as *surly, mean, brutish, rough, dishonest, churlish, and rude*. And he surely displayed these traits before David’s warriors.

In contrast, notice David’s initial attitude. Even though he held the military power, his message was full of care and humility, wishing Nabal and his household long life and good health, introducing himself as “your son David” (*vs. 8, NIV*).

As for Abigail, the Bible tells us that she was intelligent and beautiful. Notice her behavior: she provided an abundant amount of choice food; she ran to appease David, bowed down before him, addressed herself as “your servant” and David as “my master,” and asked for forgiveness. She also reminded David that as a man of God, he needed to avoid needless bloodshed.

The result of Abigail’s tactful and humble action brought about a complete turn in David’s intentions. He praised the Lord for sending her and praised her for her good judgment. This effective mediation, full of godly spirit, saved the lives of many innocent men. As for Nabal, David did not need to shed blood, because the man died—probably of heart failure—a victim of his own fear.

It’s easy (usually) to be kind to those we like. But what about those we don’t? Think of those you find very disagreeable. How would they react if you displayed a humble and gentle attitude toward them? Through God’s grace, give it a try (remembering, too, that you might not always be the most likable and lovable soul either).

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 7:12*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Describe the foundations of Christian relationships.

Feel: Cherish the attitudes that strengthen bonds in the family, church, and community.

Do: Apply the principles of relationships necessary to heal and promote positive relationships in our lives.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Building Christian Relationships

- A** What biblical principles guide the way we treat one another when we are hurt, angry, or afraid?
- B** What biblical principles teach us how to build intimacy?
- C** Why are confession and forgiveness so important?
- D** How should we approach barriers to relationships that have arisen from past experiences with another?

II. Feel: Attitudes That Bind

- A** What attitudes should we cultivate in our relationships to our leaders? Our children and other family members? Our neighbors? Those with whom we disagree?
- B** How did Christ model relationships with leaders, with His quarreling disciples, and with difficult crowds? What close relationships did He have, and how did He maintain these?

III. Do: The Golden Rule

- A** How does the Golden Rule of conduct inform our everyday relationships?
- B** What needs to be done, with Christ's help, to promote healing in any of our present or past relationships?
- C** What kinds of things can we do to strengthen our relationships with our neighbors and family and church members?

► **Summary:** As we seek to be a blessing to one another, we will confess our faults and forgive one another, be considerate and encouraging, and always seek to build one another up.

Repaying Evil With Blessings

What is the true intent of 1 Peter 3:8–12? What are some of the immediate ways you can apply these principles to your own life?

Jesus upgraded the “eye for an eye” approach to turning the other cheek (*Matt. 5:38, 39*). This was a revolutionary concept then and still is today for many cultures and traditions. Unfortunately, even Christians rarely return good for evil. But Jesus keeps saying: “ ‘Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart’ ” (*Matt. 11:29, NIV*).

A couple with small children was experiencing serious problems with their neighbors. On several occasions, and in nasty tones, these neighbors told the young parents how disagreeable it was to see play equipment installed in the yard and to hear the children playing on it. They complained about certain sections of the young family’s yard and how they were bothered by this and that. The young couple did not appreciate being talked to in such a harsh and unkind tone. After all, they were not doing anything against the neighborhood rules. One day, when the family was harvesting apples from the backyard apple trees, the mother decided to give the neighbors two freshly baked apple pies. The neighbors accepted the pies gladly. That simple act made a difference in their relationship, probably because they never would have expected anything like that from people whom they had been constantly harassing.

How did David pay back Saul’s constant attacks on his life? *1 Sam. 24:4–6*. What does this tell us about David’s character? How might we need to apply the same attitude in our own experience, especially when we might be having problems with someone who, in his or her own way, also could be “anointed of the Lord”?

First Samuel records four times when David expressed the immorality of lifting his hand against “the Lord’s anointed.” Even though he had opportunities to take revenge, he repeatedly tried to approach and forgive the king. David chose a humble and godly manner in his dealings with someone who wasn’t kind to him.

Shouldn’t we all, in whatever situation we are facing, seek to do the same?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Recognize the importance of allowing God to be Lord of our relationships with other people.

Just for Teachers: Emphasize the importance, indeed, the centrality, of relationships with others in the Christian life. Relationships may have positive or negative effects upon us. God wants them to be positive.

“I love humanity; it’s people I can’t stand!” So said Linus, a character in Charles Schultz’ “Peanuts” comic strip. Linus was a fictional counterpart to the frustrated idealist in all of us. We have high standards for ourselves and others, especially others. We open our eyes in the morning with every intention of spreading mercy, patience, peace, and love. It becomes a little more difficult as we find our way to the kitchen, only to discover that someone drank our supply of all-natural, volcanic spring water we use to make our caffeine-free, organically grown herbal tea. But we can deal with that.

After a few more encounters with imperfect people, as opposed to this platonic ideal of “humanity” that exists (primarily) in our heads, we leave the house, only to find that someone dented our bumper during the night and neglected to leave a note containing a phone number and insurance information. You know, the bumper that used to have the molded plastic Christian fish symbol that now lies in pieces on the pavement. The smile is a little tighter now, and the eyes a tiny bit narrower. And we aren’t even in traffic yet.

People. As the song says, you meet them every day. Or you encounter the results of their actions, some positive, many not so much. Every encounter results in a relationship. Relationships are the cause of—and the solution to—all the world’s problems, but one relationship can empower you to *really* spread mercy, patience, peace, and love: the relationship with Jesus Christ.

Discuss With the Class: Is your relationship with God strong enough to keep you on the right path in your relationships with other people?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. Remembering Who You Are (*Review Ephesians 4:1–5 with your class.*)

When the human race was created, we were in unity, or at least in

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Forgiveness

It is possible to appear to live a rich and meaningful religious life, yet have serious relational problems. It's a fact of life that as human beings we often cross each other and cause each other pain, even—and sometimes especially—in the church. Hence, how important we learn the art of forgiveness.

Read Ephesians 4:32. How well have you been applying this biblical truth in your life? Whom do you need to forgive, and why is it important for your own good to forgive them?

Only in recent years has the counseling profession started to look more positively at the importance of spiritual principles for mental health. For decades religion and spirituality were seen by many psychologists and counselors as an underlying source of guilt and fear. Not so much anymore. Today many utilize the protective effects of a committed Christian viewpoint. “Therapies” such as prayer, spiritual journaling, memorization of key biblical texts, and forgiveness protocols are now recognized as helping many people overcome a variety of emotional disturbances. Forgiveness counts among the most soothing strategies, even if the ability to truly forgive and be forgiven comes only from God through a God-transformed heart (*Ezek. 36:26*).

Read Matthew 5:23–25; Luke 17:3, 4; 23:34. What do they teach us about forgiveness, as well?

Sometimes one may think that forgiveness virtually is impossible to grant. But no human being will ever reach the extent of what Jesus bore in the way of pain and humiliation: the King and Creator of the universe was unjustly degraded and crucified by His creatures. Yet, Jesus, in complete humility, cared for them enough to implore the Father for their forgiveness.

At times people wrong others without a full understanding of the pain they are causing. Other times people offend because they are insecure or have personal problems, and so they try to obtain relief by hurting others. How can the awareness of others' problems help you offer forgiveness? How can you learn to forgive those who are purposely trying to hurt you?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

fellowship, with God. The first sin broke that unity. We no longer knew God. We didn't understand His motives. In fact, we were suspicious of Him, because we attributed our own selfishness to Him.

At that point, it wasn't too difficult to assume that other people were out to get us, as well; and they often were, because they really were just like us. Yes, we could try to be good, fair, and kind, and even succeed some of the time. We even devised codes of ethics and law to remind ourselves not to yield to our worst impulses most of the time. But failure was assumed, and, in order to work, these codes of law and ethics required the threat of punishment for violation.

Eventually, God revealed His law to Moses to remind us of where we had come from and how far we had strayed. It could be compared to a finger directing us toward the character of God, which was supposed to be the model for our relationships with one another and Him. But people became intensely fascinated with the loops and whorls and fine lines on the finger. Anything to avoid noticing what was really important.


Through Christ, God restored the unity with Him—and one another—that we were meant to enjoy. We no longer had to be what we had been. God was in us, and we were in Him, one in the Spirit and at peace.

Consider This: God has brought us in unity with Him and one another in His body, the church. Why, then, do we have such a difficult time recognizing it and acting as if it were true? How can we be sure to remember who God meant us to be?

II. Do Unto Others . . . *(Review Matthew 7:12 with your class.)*

Our perception of what is “good” for other people often is clouded by our own selfish desires and preferences. Sometimes we're just plain wrong. But still, we're called to be active in meeting peoples' needs. To do this, we must ask God to show us what those needs are and to be open to His guidance.

Consider This: Have you ever tried to help someone, only to find out what you thought he or she needed wasn't really what was needed at all? Or have you found yourself completely oblivious to the needs around you? How can we be more open to the needs of others and be prepared to meet them?

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Confess Your Sins to Each Other

How do you interpret James's recommendation to confess sins to one another? *James 5:16*. Dwell on this verse and ask yourself how you need to apply its teaching to your own situation.

Sins against my neighbor require my confession to him or her in order to secure forgiveness and to restore the relationship. It also shows that I am willing to take the responsibility for what I have done and that I trust and hope for acceptance and forgiveness. By God's grace, a noble soul will grant forgiveness, regardless of the size of the offense.

There is an additional interpretation of James's text, which offers great healing possibilities. Confessing sins, errors, and transgressions to someone you trust brings about emotional healing. Opening up one's own imperfection to a godly Christian friend will help alleviate the burden of sin. In addition, mutual confession deepens interpersonal relationships. Trusting and being trusted provide the bonding that will make a friendship genuine and lasting.

In fact, the entire counseling profession is founded upon the principle that talking is good for the soul. Although there are mental disorders that necessitate professional treatment, many feelings of distress can be relieved at the church and community levels. And this is especially true for problems created by the deterioration of interpersonal relationships—misunderstandings, slander, jealousy, etc. Following James's advice not only will alleviate psychological burden but also bring renewed strength to change destructive behaviors.

A word of caution though. Although disclosure of committed sins to a close friend may bring much relief, it makes the confessor vulnerable. There is always the risk that our friend will reveal the confidence to others, and this is destructive to those involved.

Most important, we always can confess our trespasses to the Lord in full confidence and with the assured certainty of forgiveness. Read 1 Peter 5:7. Defective relationships may bring uncertainty and even fear and anxiety. Others may be able to help, but the surest aid comes from God, who is willing to take all our cares at any time, leaving us with a genuine sense of relief for having left our burdens in His hands.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**III. Prayer Together** (Review James 5:14–16 with your class.)

In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, most of us are familiar with the service of anointing and prayer for the sick. The text for review from James is the passage upon which it is based. Fewer are aware of its close connection with the idea of confessing one's faults to other people.

Confession to anyone other than God is problematic to most Protestants. Nearly every commentary on these verses will advise the reader not to take this too literally and to exercise extreme care in regard to how much and to whom he or she confesses. In an ideal world, we *could* share anything with fellow Christians and not worry about being judged or gossiped about. This is not that ideal world.

But we should, at least, stand ready to examine our consciences and admit when we are wrong. When we harm others, we should take responsibility and tell the wronged person and make it right. Nor is it excessively idealistic to seek out fellow Christians with whom we can share our deepest struggles and do likewise for them. In this way, we might be able to neutralize the forces that corrode our spiritual lives and the life of the church.

Consider This: In what situations might it be appropriate to confess one's shortcomings to others, as well as to God? Why might it, in such cases, be a healing experience, as the passage in James suggests?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Thought Questions:

❶ The quality of your relationship with God is revealed in the quality of your relationships with other people. True, false, or complicated? Discuss.

❷ What exactly is forgiveness, and why is it so difficult? Why is it also so essential?

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Building Others Up

Read the following texts, and ask yourself how you can apply the teaching to your own life. Why is this so important, not only for yourself but for others? *Eph. 4:29, 1 Thess. 5:11, Rom. 14:19.*

Paul admonishes the early church communities to avoid the deterioration of personal relationships in the “body of Christ.” Many interpersonal difficulties come from tearing each other down and, in the process, hurting the entire community. People who engage in gossip and backbiting tend to have problems themselves—feelings of inferiority, the need to be noticed, a desire for control or power, and other insecurities. These people need help to abandon this hurtful way of dealing with their inner conflicts.

Indeed, feeling well about oneself helps to prevent being involved in gossip and slander. Members of the body of Christ need to consider themselves privileged for having received the gift of salvation (*Ps. 17:8, 1 Pet. 2:9*). With this understanding, the emphasis becomes building others up and working toward mutual edification. Words of encouragement and approval, emphasis on the positive side of things, humility, and a joyful attitude are ways of supporting those with personal problems.

Another way to help is to serve as relational mediators. Jesus calls peacemakers “‘blessed’ ” and “‘children of God’ ” (*Matt. 5:9*), and James says that peacemakers will reap “a harvest of righteousness” (*James 3:18, NIV*).

Read Matthew 7:12. Why is this so key to all relationships?

This principle can be considered a priceless jewel for social relationships. It is positive, it is based on love, it is universal, and it stretches above and beyond human law. The “golden rule” also brings about practical benefits to everyone involved.

A Chinese farmer was tending his rice paddy up in the mountain terraces overlooking the valley and the sea. One day he saw the beginning of a tidal wave—the sea retreated, leaving a wide portion of the bay exposed—and he knew that the water would return with force, destroying everything in the valley. He thought of his friends working in the valley and decided to set his rice field on fire. His friends immediately ran up the mountain to put the fire out and thus missed being killed in the tidal wave. As a result of this spirit of helping one another, their lives were saved.

The lesson is clear.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Application Questions:**

1 Can you remember an occasion when you returned good for evil? Was it difficult? Was it rewarding? What was the result?

2 Do you fully accept that God has forgiven you for your sins and imperfections? How has this made an impact on your relationships with others?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The following activity is meant to illustrate the core of Jesus' teaching about relationships, as seen in Matthew 7:12, and how we can apply it in specific situations in our daily lives.

Prominently display Matthew 7:12, “‘In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you’ ” (*NIV*). What form would being true to this teaching take in one or more of the following situations? (Feel free to come up with your own hypothetical scenarios):

- 1 You are supervising a new employee at your workplace. This person is pleasant, thoughtful, and genuinely eager to do his or her job well, but it is becoming clear that he or she isn't really cut out for the job. There may be interpersonal issues, as well.
- 2 Your neighbor has developed an enthusiasm for what he calls “meadow gardening.” It appears to you and others as merely an excuse not to mow his lawn. Others in the neighborhood are getting catty about it, and some have left anonymous nasty notes for the neighbor. You commiserate, but as property values are dropping in the current economy anyway, you can't help but be concerned yourself.
- 3 It's Christmas or some other holiday that brings families together over great distances. Your brother-in-law has very strident politics that differ markedly from yours, and he never hesitates to bring them up. You've never gotten along with him, but he's basically a decent person, and he loves your sister, and she loves him. In spite of that, you're not proud of how you've reacted on some past occasions.

Further Study: Read Ephesians 4:25–32 and underline the words that touch your heart most directly. Reflect on all the things you can do, with God’s help, to improve your relationship with other people.

These are portions of a letter that Ellen White wrote in 1908 to an evangelist: “I have this message for you from the Lord: Be kind in speech, gentle in action. Guard yourself carefully, for you are inclined to be severe and dictatorial, and to say rash things. . . . Harsh expressions grieve the Lord; unwise words do harm. I am charged to say to you, Be gentle in your speech; watch well your words; let no harshness come into your utterances or into your gestures. . . .

“When the daily experience is one of looking unto Jesus and learning of Him, you will reveal a wholesome, harmonious character. Soften your representations, and let not condemnatory words be spoken. Learn of the great Teacher. Words of kindness and sympathy will do good as a medicine, and will heal souls that are in despair. The knowledge of the Word of God brought into the practical life will have a healing, soothing power. Harshness of speech will never bring blessing to yourself or to any other soul.”—*Gospel Workers*, pp. 163, 164.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ How much do you like to gossip? Even if you don’t do it yourself, how eager and open are you to hear gossip from others? Why, in a sense, is that just as bad as spreading gossip yourself? How can you stop being part of what can cause other people a great deal of pain?
- ❷ Forgiveness can be so difficult, especially when we have been very badly hurt. How do you learn to forgive those who don’t ask for forgiveness, who don’t care about your forgiveness, and who might even scorn it? What is your responsibility in such cases?
- ❸ Verbal and physical abuse within families is a reality that brings much pain to individuals and groups. What should be the Christian attitude to help prevent this problem? What should be recommended when forgiveness does not cause any change in abusive behavior?
- ❹ Think over your life right now. What steps can you take to bring about an improvement in your relationships? Why are humility, trust in God, and a desire to do right so important in such a process?