

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 *surlly, 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).

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?

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?

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 person 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.

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 as 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.

Further Study: Read Ephesians 4:25–32 and underline the words that touch your heart more 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:

- 1 How much do you like to gossip? And 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?
- 2 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?
- 3 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?
- 4 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?

Standing for the Right

by PHYLLIS VALLIERES

Dorothy had been looking for work for two years, and at times she struggled to understand why God hadn't helped her find a job. Then a Bible text came to mind: "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent" (*Rev. 3:19, NIV*). Dorothy bowed her head and asked God to forgive her unbelief.

She arrived at a job interview and was asked to complete a test in electronic soldering. She had never soldered anything before, and the supervisor was amazed at her work. "Are you sure you've never done this type of work before?" he asked. Dorothy got the job.

Dorothy often sang as she worked beside Cindy, her supervisor. "Why are you so happy?" Cindy asked. When Dorothy said that Jesus is her personal friend, Cindy said, "I want what you have."

Dorothy gave Cindy a Bible. Cindy read it and asked questions about what she read. Before long Cindy gave her life to Christ.

Dorothy had been working for the company for several months when a supervisor announced that workers would have two weeks off with pay at Christmas, but that they must work four Saturdays to earn the vacation. Dorothy offered to work on Sundays instead, but the supervisor doubted whether it could be arranged. Dorothy said, "If God wants me to work here, He will work this out, but I will not work on His Sabbath."

Some coworkers sneered at her for asking for special privileges. Dorothy prayed, "God please don't leave me. I need your strength to stand firm."

Her request was granted, and Dorothy went to work on Sundays. There she met Jean and felt God telling her to talk to her. The two ate together, and Dorothy said, "God arranged for us to meet today." Jean agreed, for she wanted to know more about God. Dorothy arranged for her to study the Bible with some friends of hers, and soon Jean and her brother and her boyfriend were studying the Bible together. Several months later Jean and her boyfriend asked the pastor to marry them, and all three were baptized.

"It pays to stand for the right, even when I can't see where God is leading," Dorothy says.

We can share our faith with others as we give our mission offerings as well, for those funds help fund outreach programs around the world.

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