

Love, Limits & Life

NORTHWEST WOMEN | Growing in Grace | September 2024

*"Are **you** a drain
or a fountain"*
in your **relationships**
from The Forge

Some traits of a Fountain

A positive thinker
Makes the best of every situation
Makes lemonade from lemons
Loves helping other people more than themselves
Naturally kind and compassionate
A great listener
Volunteers and mentors others
Seeks reconciliation when wronged

Two words to describe a fountain:
"joy" and **"giver"**

Some Traits of a Drain

Lots of negativity
Focuses on what's wrong or how you've been wronged
Envious or jealous of others
Feels bad things always and only happen to them
Wants to be listened to, but is a poor listener themselves
Delights in others' misfortune
Spiteful and Selfish

Two words to describe a drain:
"Drama" and **"Taker"**

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT *toxic relationships?*

The word *toxic* means “poisonous.” Toxic relationships are those that poison our peace and our ability to enjoy another person. A toxic relationship will leave one exhausted, frustrated, and, in some cases, depressed. Toxic relationships can affect business partnerships, sports teams, and, of course, families. Some disharmony in a relationship is normal; however, some people inject poison into every relationship, making healthy give-and-take impossible. Those are toxic people, and the Bible has some advice for us in dealing with them.

There will be some people whose company we don’t prefer, but that doesn’t make them toxic. We may be polar opposites in ideology with someone but can maintain a comfortable relationship. Democrats can enjoy the company of Republicans, a New York Yankees fan can have a friendly relationship with a Boston Red Sox fan, and Christians can engage in healthy interactions with non-Christians. But when a person is toxic, he or she is unable to maintain a healthy relationship with anyone. Only those willing to suffer the selfish demands of the toxic person can endure such a relationship for long.

Several factors determine whether or not a relationship or a person is toxic:

1. The relationship is completely one-sided in favor of the toxic person. Toxic people are incredibly narcissistic and can think only of themselves and what they want at the moment. This is a direct violation of Philippians 2:3-4, which says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” Toxic people may pretend they are doing something for someone else, but there is always an ulterior motive that will benefit them.

2. There is continual drama in toxic relationships. Ironically, toxic people are often the ones who proclaim for all to hear how much they “hate drama.” Yet they instigate it everywhere they go. They seem to thrive on it. They cannot go from point A to point B in a simple, straightforward manner. They are a constant tangle of excuses, lies, fabrications, and crazy situations that weary everyone else in their world. They enjoy complicating otherwise simple situations because it keeps

attention focused on them.

3. They are always right. Always. Toxic people look with disdain on anyone who dares correct or disagree with them. They mask their extreme pride with fake humility, but there is rarely any true repentance because they don't believe they are wrong. It is everyone else's fault. Proverbs 16:18 says, "Pride goes before a fall and a haughty spirit before destruction." Haughtiness dominates toxic people, even when they try to hide it behind self-pity or groveling. If you are in a toxic relationship, the "destruction" the toxic person has earned due to pride often lands on you, too.

4. Others dread confrontations or interactions with a toxic person. They may appear delightfully charming to outsiders, but those in relationship with a toxic person know the real story. Every interaction, no matter how innocent it may begin, ends with the twist of a dagger. Everyone else is left with the fallout while the toxic person skates away seemingly unfazed. If you become anxious at the thought of another interaction with someone in your life, through no fault of your own, you may be in a toxic relationship.

5. Toxic people relish victimhood. Everything happens to toxic people, and the world should take notice. They shouldn't be held responsible, they think, because it wasn't their fault—even though it was. Self-pity practically drips from them, even though they may mask it with a facade of strength. They love to appear as martyrs and will even construct situations that portray them in that light. Those in relationship with a toxic person usually end up looking like the bad guy. Outsiders often silently judge the friends or family members who are "intolerant" of this poor victim, which creates division and misunderstanding in peripheral relationships.

6. Toxic people lie. If their mouths are moving, toxic people are probably lying. They lie more easily than they tell the truth and are so convincing that even those who know better question their own perceptions. Toxic people justify their lies by telling themselves that they had no choice. When caught red-handed in a lie, they may feign remorse, but all the while they may be concealing a dozen more lies no one has discovered yet. Scripture has harsh words for liars. God has a zero-tolerance policy for liars, and He is not fooled by any of their excuses (Revelation 21:8). Proverbs 6:16-19 lists seven things the Lord hates, and lying is on the list twice.

*"We have
been called
to peace"*

We have been called to peace (Colossians 3:15), but a toxic relationship destroys peace. Some people are so abusive that they will not allow us to seek or broker peace in any area. When the relationship is continually filled with unwanted drama,

when you find yourself dreading the next blowup, when you cannot believe anything this person says, or when someone is destroying your reputation and sanity, then it is time to create distance in the relationship.

People-pleasers are the most frequent victims of toxic relationships because they want the toxic person to like them. But there are times when closing the door on a relationship is the wisest thing you can do (Proverbs 22:24-25).

In every situation involving a toxic relationship, take the matter to God in prayer. Cry out to "receive mercy and find grace" to help in the time of need (Hebrews 4:16). "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Petition the Lord unceasingly to change the heart of the person bringing the toxicity. There is hope and healing in Him.

*"Cast all your anxiety on Him
because He cares for you"
1 Peter 5:7*

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT DEALING WITH *negative people?*

We all have occasions that require dealing with negative people. There are two categories of negative people: those who believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior and those who do not. These two types of negative people require different approaches. The Bible offers insight and wisdom on how to handle both kinds.

FIRST, THOUGH, WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “NEGATIVE PEOPLE”? Negative people tend to focus on others’ faults (or their own faults). They may regularly point out shortcomings with their comments, attitudes, and frowns. Negative people will approach situations from a pessimistic viewpoint, assuming the worst in any given situation. Sometimes negative people disguise their negativity by using humor or sarcasm, but it still ultimately results in someone being or feeling put down.

In dealing with negative people, one serious consideration is whether or not there is a church structure in place in which to handle them. **If the negative person is a member of your church or someone at work who has expressed a desire to walk in a Christian manner with you, then he or she should be treated as a believer.** For dealing with negative people in the believer’s category, we turn to Matthew 18:15–17. That passage clearly lays out the progression of how fellow Christians should deal with each other in regard to sin. A negative, fault-finding, bitter attitude is a sin; Israel sinned against God in the wilderness by complaining about their circumstances (Numbers 11:1). You have a responsibility as a brother or sister in Christ to lovingly “point out their fault just between the two of you” (Matthew 18:15). Again, this is a responsibility all believers have to each other.

*“Humility,
prayer,
wise counsel,
and tact..”*

For non-believers, it’s different, since they do not fall under the rules of church discipline detailed in Matthew 18. How you approach negative unbelievers must be decided on a case-by-case basis. To reemphasize, you do

not have a responsibility to “show them their fault” according to the Bible. But there are still some godly tools that can help you proceed in the best manner.

Humility, prayer, wise counsel, and tact are great assets in successfully handling a negative person. Not proceeding with wisdom can be dangerous. The apostle Paul said, “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).

First, humility is crucial, and your perspective is critical to handling the person how Jesus desires. Try not to view the person as a “negative person” but rather as a creation of God who is caught in a sinful habit. He still deserves your respect, attention, and love. Do not violate his dignity—no matter how aggravating he is or has been. Before approaching the person, try to determine, through prayer and counsel, if you have a “plank in your own eye” (see Matthew 7:3-5). This will help you walk in love toward the negative person and handle the issue in a loving fashion. Confronting someone will be much easier once your “eye” is clear. Additionally, there may be something in you—an attitude, an assumption, etc.—making it harder for you to deal with negative people. Once you have given that to God, dealing with negativity may become easier.

*Pray...
for the negative person,
for wisdom,
for what to do next*

“Try not to view the person as a “negative person” but rather as a creation of God who is caught in a sinful habit.”

Next, it’s important to pray for the negative person in question. Also, pray for wisdom and for God to reveal to you what to do next. It’s always smart to get wise counsel from a pastor or a trusted believer who will also pray about how to proceed. Just be careful not to turn “getting counsel” into a time to complain and gossip. Then, once you have a clear plan of action, be tactful in

your approach. Meekness is part of wisdom (James 3:13).

Be aware that the best way to deal with a negative person may simply be to limit your contact with him, if possible. However, God gives wisdom to those who ask (James 1:5), so hearing from Him and trusted, godly people in your life is the best place to start.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT BEING *mean spirited?*

A mean-spirited person is one whose natural impulse is to cause harm or trouble for others. We are all mean-spirited at times, but this article will focus upon those whose personalities are characterized the majority of the time by hateful, rude, or spiteful behavior. The fictional curmudgeon Ebenezer Scrooge, prior to his Christmas transformation, is a good example of a mean-spirited person in *A Christmas Carol*.

Mean-spiritedness is part of our fallen sinful nature (Romans 3:10, 23; 8:5). We are born selfish with a desire to gratify ourselves at any expense. Depending upon the effectiveness of our early training, we may learn more socially acceptable ways of interacting with others, but we can still behave in hateful, mean-spirited ways due to the inability to control our own evil tendencies (Romans 7:14-20). Mean-spirited people are not pleasant to be around, so we learn to curb some of those selfish impulses in order to be more popular. However, there are some who don't care what anyone thinks, and they keep their mean-spirited actions on public display.

The Bible has a lot to say about being mean-spirited and the fact that it dominates the lives of many who reject God. Jesus offers a makeover for us when we give our lives to Him. Second Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." One of those "old things" that are passed away is our mean-spirited nature. Jesus spent much of His earthly ministry talking about a new way of conducting ourselves. Matthew 5 includes a list of character traits that God finds desirable in us. Verses 5-12 are known as the Beatitudes, and they highlight the behaviors that should characterize followers of Christ.

Christlike living is in direct opposition to a mean spirit. To highlight some differences:

	Our Mean Spirit wants....	Jesus says...
Matt. 6:14-15	To get revenge	To forgive
Matt. 23:12	To exalt itself	To seek humility
Mark 9:35	To be first	We are blessed if we choose to be last
Matt. 5:9	To fight	"Blessed are the peacemakers"
Prov. 13:3	To gossip	Guard our mouths
Col. 4:6	To be rude	Our speech should be gracious

WHAT ARE Boundaries AND ARE THEY BIBLICAL?

A boundary is a “dividing line.” In geography, a boundary is that which marks the end of one property or jurisdiction and the beginning of another. In interpersonal relationships, a boundary is what divides one person from another, so that each can have separate identities, responsibilities, and privileges. A boundary creates necessary “space” between individuals. Healthy boundaries define expectations and show respect for others.

Healthy
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others.

BIBLICALLY SPEAKING, BOUNDARIES ARE RELATED TO SELF-CONTROL. The Bible commands us to control *ourselves*, whereas our human nature desires to control *others* (Titus 2:12). If left unchecked, our natural desires run roughshod over others. Personal boundaries help to limit our selfish inclination to control or manipulate others. Likewise, boundaries protect us from those who have no self-control and who wish to control us. A person with clear, healthy boundaries communicates to others what is and is not permissible, saying, in effect, “This is my jurisdiction, and you have no right to interfere.”

BOUNDARIES CAN BE USED IN HEALTHY WAYS AND SINFUL WAYS. The way to know which boundaries are godly is to examine the motive. Are you protecting yourself or someone weaker from potential harm, either emotional or physical? If so, then you are setting healthy and needful boundaries. However, if you are maintaining distance simply because you desire to exclude someone, that is sinful.

PROPER BOUNDARIES AID BELIEVERS IN KEEPING OUT WORLDLY INFLUENCES. Children of the light have no fellowship with darkness and are thus separate from the world (2 Corinthians 6:14). Being kind and friendly is Christ-like, but we are not to embrace the world’s way of doing things (James 4:4). Our wish is not to keep people away, but when people are being destructive, the boundaries we set can limit the evil they commit against us.

BOUNDARIES ARE ABOUT TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR OWN LIVES.

God gives us freedom to choose to live within His boundaries or outside of them, and to live outside of God's boundaries means to accept the consequences. Living inside God's boundaries brings blessing, and living outside of them brings destruction and death (Romans 6:23). Adam and Eve had one boundary in the Garden of Eden: abstain from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Lord gave them freedom to remain within His bounds, but they chose to overstep the boundary and sin. Their response to God's revelation of their sin was to blame someone else rather than take responsibility for their lack of self-control. Eve blamed Satan, and Adam blamed Eve (Genesis 3:12-13). Boundaries limit destructive behaviors, and that is why both God and society have laws and consequences for those who overstep those laws (Romans 13:1-4).



Living inside God's boundaries brings blessing, and living outside of them brings destruction and death

BOUNDARIES ARE ALSO HELPFUL IN PARENTING.

Setting healthy limits for children will protect them (Proverbs 22:6). Unhealthy boundaries tend to be controlling and selfishly motivated. Boundaries should guide a child to individuate into the person God created him or her to be. Boundaries allow children to develop an identity separate from their parents within the safety of their family. Without an identity, people "vanish" into other people or expect them not to have any differences.

Learning boundaries as a child is important. It is more difficult to learn boundaries later in life. Children will not grow up to respect God's boundaries if they do not learn boundaries in their home. Modeling is necessary; parents cannot teach boundaries and not abide by them themselves.

A PERSON WITH HEALTHY BOUNDARIES TAKES RESPONSIBILITY FOR HIS OWN LIFE AND ALLOWS OTHERS TO LIVE THEIRS.

The goal of boundaries is to make sacrifices for people when appropriate, but never in a destructive manner. We should be available for people in a crisis, but unavailable to indulgent demands. Being gracious is not a blank check for others to continually drain our emotional account. Saying "yes" out of fear of rejection is really a selfish motive for being kind. Being kind in order to gain someone's favor smacks of hypocrisy and shows a need for boundaries. Fear of man's disapproval can lead to codependency, the unhealthy alternative to interdependency.

BOUNDARIES TEACH US TO ACCEPT ONE ANOTHER AS BEING DIFFERENT YET STILL VALUABLE.

God uses boundaries to help us appreciate the differences in people rather than be upset by them. A godly friend tells us what we need to hear, not necessarily

what we want to hear (Proverbs 27:6). We are free to be ourselves with others if we control ourselves. Boundaries are not selfish when we use our freedom to serve and love one another because we are keeping our own flesh under control (Galatians 5:13). In a godly relationship, both people are free to love each other and to be themselves because neither is using or manipulating the other.

Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). A believer who sees his need for self-control so he can take responsibility for his own actions and not encroach on others will seek the Lord's help for growth in this character trait. Boundaries are a fruit of submitting to God's will, and He will enable us to make godly choices.

BEING CHRIST-LIKE MEANS WE CAN SAY "NO" IN UNSELFISH, HELPFUL WAYS.

Sometimes, love requires us to say "no" to those we love. For example, if a family member is abusing alcohol at a family gathering, then it is Christ-like to tell him not to do so. A proper boundary has then been set. If the response is to get angry, leave, and never come back, then that person simply was not able to respect the boundary. It is not sinful to say "no" to someone if he is crossing personal boundaries in harmful and destructive ways. Every boy or girl on a date should have clear boundaries that must not be crossed.

Boundaries can be difficult to establish because saying "no" may have been off limits or mistakenly taught as being ungodly. God says to tell the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). God tells us to humbly control ourselves, lovingly confront sin, graciously accept others, and overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). Plus, He promises wisdom in every circumstance (James 1:5).

A believer who sees his need for self-control so he can take responsibility for his own actions and not encroach on others will seek the Lord's help for growth in this character trait.

Building Healthy Relationships

4 SIMPLE TIPS FROM THE BIBLE

from Harvest Church

1. TALK TO EACH OTHER

Good communication is key to any relationship. The Bible tells us to speak honestly and kindly to each other. Ephesians 4:15 says, "Speak the truth in love," which means we should not only be forthright in our communications with others, but also gentle and caring in our delivery.

2. BE HONEST AND TRUSTWORTHY

Trust is like the glue that holds relationships together. The Bible says it's important to be honest and keep promises. Proverbs 11:13 tells us, "A trustworthy person keeps a secret," showing us the value of honesty and trustworthiness.

3. FORGIVE EACH OTHER

We all make mistakes, and forgiving each other is crucial for good relationships. The Bible tells stories of forgiveness, like the one about the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32. Forgiving others helps heal hurts and brings us closer together.

4. CARE FOR EACH OTHER

Showing kindness and putting others first is what living the Christian life is all about. Jesus set an example by serving others and caring for them. Philippians 2:3-4 says, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves."

While these commands are simply stated, they are often difficult to put into practice. Our sinful natures drive us toward selfishness instead, so we must be deliberate and intentional in putting them into action. It's important to be conscious of how we talk and interact with others. Pray and ask God for help in keeping your promises, forgiving when needed, and helping others in practical ways.

7 KEYS TO Healthy Relationships

from Love Worth Finding | Adrian Rogers

① **LOVE** We are called to love others just as God has loved us. Check out John 13:34-35.

② **HUMILITY** Don't treat people in a condescending manner and be willing to admit when you're wrong. Check out 1 Peter 5:5.

③ **SERVICE** Jesus didn't demand that others serve Him. Rather, He dedicated Himself to serving others. Check out Mark 10:45.

④ **PATIENCE** Our patience with one another is rooted in God's patience with us. Check out Psalm 103:8.

⑤ **ACCEPTANCE** We accept one another just as God has accepted us in Christ. Check out Ephesians 1:6.

⑥ **AFFECTION** Jesus didn't simply say that He loved people. He took action to demonstrate His love. Check out Romans 12:10.

⑦ **FORGIVENESS** If we've received forgiveness from God, we should extend forgiveness to others. Check out Matthew 18:21-55.

HOW CAN I BUILD, INVEST & KEEP Healthy Relationships?

from DesireJesus.com

I. RELATIONAL HEALTH IS MODELED AND MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH JESUS

“When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”

JOHN 17:1-5, ESV

As Christians who trust the counsel of Scripture, we believe that there is one God who exists in three co-eternal and co-equal persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That means that God, by His very nature, has always existed in a perfect relationship - even before He created angels or humans.

Throughout the course of His earthly ministry, Jesus did things and said things that helped us understand His relationship with God the Father. His prayer in **John 17** helps shed additional light on that relationship.

In this prayer, Jesus demonstrates several important things. He shows that it was His desire to glorify the Father, and that it was the Father's desire to glorify the Son. We see that the Father shares His authority over creation with the Son. We see that the Father shares the authority to grant eternal life with the Son. We also see that Jesus defines eternal life as a relationship with the only true God (**v. 3**). And how is that relationship established? It's established through knowing Jesus by faith.

It's quite obvious when looking through the pages of Scripture that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit live in a perfect relationship. We are now offered the privilege to experience that divine relationship through faith in Jesus Christ. So when we're talking about relational health, we need to understand that our capacity for relational health is directly tied to our relationship with our Creator, who designed us with the capacity to experience relationships that are a reflection of His very nature.

II. RELATIONALLY HEALTHY PEOPLE DEMONSTRATE THE VALUE OTHERS HAVE TO THEM

““Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;”

James 1:19, ESV

When I was in high school, I spent some time volunteering for a ministry that meant a lot to me. At one point, that ministry went through a very difficult stretch, but some of us tried to help out anyway. One afternoon, we volunteered to help move furniture and other items in preparation for a big project that was upcoming. As we were doing so, instead of thanking the volunteers, the primary ministry leader started yelling at the volunteers and demanding that no one leave until every piece of furniture was moved. I don't know what triggered this leader to do that, but I did notice that they had a hard time getting volunteers after that because the team felt devalued.

““The Carnegie Technological Institute has stated that 90% of all people who fail in their life's vocation fail because they cannot get along with people.”

– Getting the Church on Target, Lloyd Perry, Moody, 1977

Relationally healthy people demonstrate the value others have to them. They go out of their way to make it known. Sometimes they use words. Other times they demonstrate that value with actions or gifts, but one way or another, their value and importance gets communicated.

In **James 1:19**, James addresses the importance of healthy communication in our relationships. In that verse, he gives us three pieces of advice:

1. Be someone who makes a point to demonstrate that you're listening when others speak.
2. Be careful with the words that come out of your mouth / Think before you speak.
3. Don't rush to get angry or express anger.

III. RELATIONALLY HEALTHY FAMILIES EXHIBIT A SERVANT'S HEART

““Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.”

Colossians 3:18-21, ESV

Because of our sin natures, establishing a relationally healthy home can be challenging. We certainly can't do it without the Lord's help. I'm also convinced

that we need to embrace the heart of Christ in order to do so. During Christ's earthly ministry, He made a point to sacrificially serve others, and a healthy household is made up of those who are likewise inspired to serve one another like Jesus.

Colossians 3 speaks of wives elevating the leadership role of their husbands by submitting to their leadership. It speaks of husbands showing their wives sincere love, and resisting the urge to be harsh or abrasive with them. In a similar way, fathers are also cautioned not to needlessly provoke or exasperate their children. All that does is encourage disrespect, rebellion, and needless discouragement. And children are encouraged to contribute to the relational health of the home by obeying their parents.

When this counsel is implemented with grace, and empowered by Christ, the end result is a relationally healthy home. When this counsel is ignored, and the general tone of a home drifts from serving one another to attempting to boss, push, ignore, or rebel against one another, Christ isn't glorified, and every relationship in the home suffers.

So what should we do if we'd like to experience the kind of relational health that's described in this passage, particularly if our homes feel like they're filled with conflict and discord? Well, you can't control how others feel or what they do, but you can exhibit Spirit-empowered self-control and make the decision to do your part.

Here's some advice I recently read from Hope Health letter that I think demonstrates a servant's heart...

“1. Before you say anything to anyone, ask yourself three questions: 1) is it true? 2) is it kind? 3) is it necessary?”

2. Make promises sparingly and keep them faithfully.

3. Never miss an opportunity to compliment or say something encouraging.

4. Refuse to talk negatively about others and don't listen when others do.

5. Have a forgiving view of people. Believe that most people are doing the best they can.

6. Keep an open mind; discuss, don't argue.

7. Forget about counting to 10. Count to 1,000 before saying or doing anything that could make matters worse.

8. Let your virtues speak for themselves.

9. If someone criticizes you, see if there is any truth to what he is saying; if so, make changes.

10. Cultivate your sense of humor.

11. “Do not seek so much to be consoled, as to console; do not seek so much to be understood as to understand; do not seek so much to be loved as to love.”

– Hope Healthletter, Vol. 46, No. 1, Men's Life Lifeline (newsletter), (Grand Rapids, Fall, 1995)

IV. RELATIONALLY HEALTHY PEOPLE MAKE SACRIFICIAL INVESTMENTS IN OTHERS

Scripture provides examples of healthy relationships as well, and one of the most visible examples from the New Testament is the marriage of Aquila and Priscilla. Their names are mentioned several times in Scripture, and they developed a reputation as being an extremely valuable part of the team during the era of the early church.

We see from this Scripture that Priscilla and Aquila took the time to hear Apollos speak, then they carved out additional time to help train him better. They explained to him the way of God more accurately, and in so doing, they made a powerful investment in his preaching ministry. This is one of the many examples that remind us of the importance of healthy relationships and how the Lord uses them to help us grow as individuals as well.

Building relationships, investing in them, and keeping them long-term is one of the most difficult tasks we face in life. There are many things that can complicate that objective, and many moments when we might feel like we don't possess the emotional energy to give it one more try, or forgive one more lingering offense. But Scripture demonstrates that just as our Lord exists in an eternally perfect relationship as part of His nature, so too are we designed and empowered by Him to experience relational health based on the sacrificial example of Jesus.

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL

Caregiving

from Just Between Us

Try these helpful steps as you navigate your own way or help others take on the new role of caregiving.

1. PRACTICE EMPATHY.

There is a paradox in the family dynamics of caregiving—the more you do, the less you may be appreciated by a dependent loved one, while the less your siblings do, the more they may be appreciated. A parent may be attempting to rationalize lack of attention from one child by picturing that person in a rosier light than is realistic. Try to put yourself in the shoes of your aging parent. Practice empathy. It

is difficult to show consistent compassion and understanding in a family setting, but exercising those muscles is the key to strength and flexibility.

It is difficult to show consistent compassion and understanding in a family setting, but exercising those muscles is the key to strength and flexibility.

2. WORK WITH WHAT YOU'VE BEEN GIVEN.

Regardless of how family dynamics manifest themselves in the caregiving process, work with what you have been given. Tap into your deepest reservoirs of strength by putting on the full armor of God each day and praying with all kinds of prayers and requests in the Spirit (Eph. 6:10-18). Model love in action rather than mere feeling. Try to maintain a healthy balance between work and recreation, between time for your parents and time for your children, your spouse, your mental health, your spiritual health, and your physical health. Look for family to bring unique and wonderful gifts to the process, and forgive family members and siblings when they do not live up to your expectations. You may need to be forgiven too.

3. ASK FOR SUPPORT.

Empathy and support take many forms, but sometimes you have to ask for them. Use e-mail,

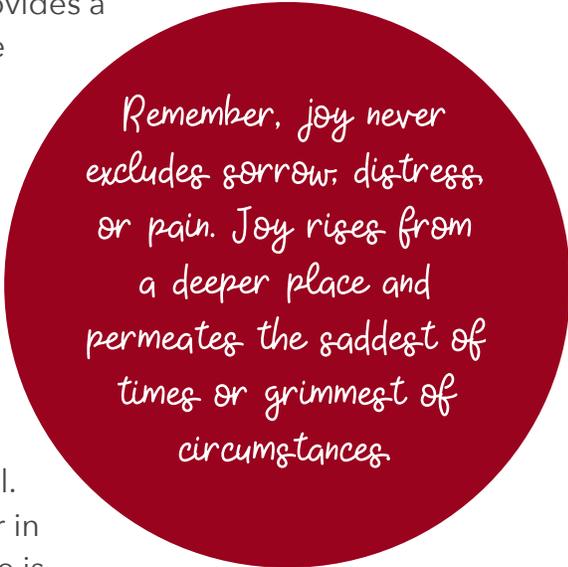
telephone calls, cards, letters, and personal visits to keep in consistent touch with siblings and other family members. Reach out to family and friends with a hug, a handshake, and a helping hand. Don't be ashamed to ask favors from relatives, even if they seem busy—busyness can be a smoke screen for feelings of helplessness. People will often wait, wishing to be asked, wanted, or needed. Don't be too proud to receive support when offered. Allow others to share in the fulfillment of caregiving.

4. SHARE LESSONS LEARNED.

As you share responsibilities with family, share your common stories, too. Recall old times to yourself and to your brothers and sisters. Tell your children the lessons you learned from the hard times. Let the memories flow—both good and bad. Everything you have experienced together has made up your particular family history. That continuity between generations provides a context for an emotionally secure old age for the elderly.

5. BE JOYFUL.

Make joy your goal in the family dynamics of caregiving. Remember, joy never excludes sorrow, distress, or pain. Joy rises from a deeper place and permeates the saddest of times or grimmest of circumstances. Unlike happiness, joy is not dependent on circumstances; rather, it is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). Even in difficult caregiving situations or in weighty decisions that families must make, peace is possible when we let Christ be Lord of our concerns.



Remember, joy never excludes sorrow, distress, or pain. Joy rises from a deeper place and permeates the saddest of times or grimmest of circumstances.

BECOMING A Good Listener

From Just Between Us | Norma Kelly

Who listened to you as a child? As a teenager? As an adult? How did it feel to be listened to and how did it feel when you were not listened to?

The greatest gift we can give another person is to share the love of Christ. One of the other great gifts is listening. It's the highest form of hospitality - the gift of ourselves - our time, our full attention, our energy. The depth and quality of our relationships will be determined by our ability to listen.

Three-dimensional listening: listening to God, listening to the woman, and listening to myself.

1. LISTENING TO GOD

Listening to God on behalf of the woman calls for spiritual sensitivity and discernment. After reflecting back the woman's story, I often speak a word of encouragement and blessing into her life. If she has difficulty focusing and maintaining continuity in her story, I may encourage her to spend time in silence in God's presence, meditating on a Bible verse such as Psalm 46:10:

"Be still and know that I am God."

If I discern from God that a woman needs to talk about a family member who has died while she has been incarcerated, I may say, "Tell me about your mother. What kind of person was she?"

2. LISTEN TO THE WOMAN.

Listening means I do not interrupt her, I do not finish her sentence, I do not provide the word she is searching for, I do not say, "I have had the same experience, let me tell you about it!" Instead I maintain appropriate eye contact and listen - to the language she uses, her tone of voice, her facial expressions, her tears, her silences. I listen in order to understand her story and reflect it back accurately.

3. LISTEN TO YOURSELF.

Every woman's story takes its toll on me. When I reach home on Friday afternoon, I am exhausted! One woman's story touched on a struggle to find acceptance by her father. Suddenly her story became my story. I was aware of familiar painful emotions rising within me. I acknowledged them inwardly and after the listening session, I took them to God. A trusted friend also provided input as I shared the impact that the listening session had on me.

WHEN HELPING BECOMES *Unhealthy*

From Just Between Us | Pam MacRae

You want to be there for others, but sometimes helping others becomes unhealthy. Learn how to help without becoming personally

If someone needs encouragement or counsel for a problem in his or her life, I generally view an invitation to engage with them as both an opportunity to serve the Lord and a gift. I want to help. I believe God has equipped me to help people walk through deep valleys, so when I am involved I feel grateful and blessed by the opportunity.

For the most part, helping others lines up with Scripture that teaches we are to encourage, love, and help carry the burdens of one another. However, helping others can lead us to an unhealthy place. We are tempted to serve others to satisfy our own desire to feel needed, worthy, or sought-after. We may give more emotional, spiritual, or physical help than is appropriate.

What were some of my take-away lessons from that situation?

1. **GOD PROVIDES HELP FOR HIS PEOPLE.** I am never the *only* answer. I was *not*, as she put it, “the only one who could help her.”
2. **TAKE NOTICE OF WHEN HELPING BECOMES UNHEALTHY.** I learned to pay attention to where my head and heart were, and notice when helping leads me to unhealthily take on the hurts of another person. If my emotions begin to mirror their emotions, that is a clue to watch for danger signs. There is a difference in experiencing sadness and concern for another person and having their issues debilitate me.
3. **TAKE TIME FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION.** I learned that regular, deep personal reflection helps me catch when I am becoming exhausted in body, soul, and spirit. Of course, normal ministry relationships can be exhausting and there are legitimate periods of time when we will feel drained of all we have to offer. But are you able to recognize when pouring yourself out for others is damaging to your own soul?

Two terms surfaced that helped me understand this risk when I studied this phenomenon in caregivers who are involved with helping the deeply traumatized. The terms “**Compassion Fatigue**” and “**Secondary Traumatic Stress**” almost define themselves. **Compassion Fatigue** is the experience of physical, emotional, and

spiritual weariness and exhaustion that comes as a result of caring for hurting people. **Secondary Traumatic Stress** occurs when the trauma of another traumatizes you so that you experience some of the same effects of the trauma. These are obviously very basic definitions for very complex experiences. Yet it is critical to understand that in proportional measure, you can experience devastating effects from listening to and caring for people who suffer great sorrows, woes, traumas, and injustice.

As with most emotions, we tend to feel them on a spectrum. I have a friend who typically describes her day as either, "The very best day of my entire life," or "The very worst day of my life." Of course, this is hyperbole-intentionally intended to be humorously dramatic. It is not supposed to be a precise evaluation of their actual experience. Thankfully, most of what we experience is not located on the extremes of the spectrum. What pushes us to one extreme or the other varies. Perhaps one

day we describe our favorite latte as what tips our day into being the very best day ever, while other days our latte is so ho-hum that we hardly notice it mattering on our 'best or worst day ever' scale.

My point is that you cannot predict what will be tolerated well or what will "send you completely over the edge." You may be able to handle hearing the great traumas of life one day, but the next day it seems to paralyze you.

It is possible to train yourself to learn how to evaluate yourself well enough to have a realistic view of your physical, spiritual, and emotional responses so you know how to respond. You need to be able to monitor your sense of personal well-being.



*You need to be able
to monitor your
sense of personal
well-being.*

WHEN YOU HELP HURTING PEOPLE, YOU HAVE TO LEARN TO DEAL WITH HOW YOU RESPOND TO HEARING SO MUCH SADNESS AND GRIEF. Self-care is a common way to describe the steps you need to take to care for your own spiritual, physical, and emotional needs. How do you manage these stressors and intentionally plan times for rest and restoration? It is the airplane oxygen mask on the mother before the child principle. You need to figure out how to get what you need in order to be conscious enough to help others.

So what is that for you? My list will be different than yours-but you need a list. If you need a starting point, **I recommend you start with how Elijah responded to ministry stress in 1 Kings 19. Find a quiet place to pray and tell the Lord all about it. Then sleep. Eat good food. Sleep some more. Eat more good food. Now go out again.**

If you are feeling trapped, helpless, alone, and overwhelmed you need to:

- pull back
- Ask God for help
- Take time to exercise
- Seek the support of wonderful friends and family
- Listen to great sermons
- Spend time pouring over Scripture passages
- Seek objective help from professional counselors who are skilled to see risk factors you may not see and heed their advice
- Ask friends to speak into your life when they see warning signs so you can act before there is a problem
- Be attentive to early warning signs so you can counter the escalation of stress factors that can lead to burnout and your own crisis.

As you care for others, stay in touch with your vulnerability. Let the Lord be your pacesetter so that you can care for the hurting people God sends your way, while staying healthy yourself!

THE ART OF *Getting Along*

From Just Between Us | Jill Briscoe

Harmony is concord or agreement. **Another word for harmony is "peace"-and making peace is often very hard work.**

The testimony of a community of believers often hangs on the ability of its members to live in harmony and to keep the peace once it is made. Paul appeals to leaders and followers alike to be sensitive to the Spirit's directives and to become ambassadors for unity.

The Spirit's most difficult work in the church is to promote harmony among its members. The art of "keeping the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace," in Ephesians 4:3, requires believers who are characterized by humility, persistence, and a passion for the body of Christ. We give God honor when we pursue harmony.

Sadly, other human beings are our biggest obstacles when it comes to practicing the spiritual art of harmony. Sometimes it seems as though the church would be a great place if we could get rid of the people! **But how do we do church with people? How do we get everyone to love or even tolerate one another?**

Paul knew of only two ways: to ground all relationships in the one relationship all believers have with the Lord Jesus Christ, and to rely on the power of the one Spirit who lives in all believers to maintain unity.

Discord within the body of Christ is a key reason why many people don't go to church. As a follower of Christ, does the fact that our lack of unity drives people away from church bother you? It should. It bothered Paul, and he always tried to be part of the solution.

UNITY ISN'T UNISON

Unity is not unison. What encourages people here may not encourage people there. But there is a common unity that allows for diversity in the church body. Paul talked much about unity in diversity. "Everyone doesn't need to do things exactly as I do," Paul reminds us. "There is one Spirit but many ways of doing things" (see 1 Cor. 12:4-11; Eph. 4:3-13). The unity we have has to do with the things we believe. It takes the Spirit to help us allow for diversity—for welcoming and embracing other people who do things a bit differently. Oh, to delight in diversity—but a diversity

that is unified. Ask God to give you a generous spirit to affirm people who do things a little differently from the way you've always done them before.

"Never act from motives of rivalry or personal vanity," Paul advises, "but in humility think more of each other than you do of yourselves. None of you should think only of his own affairs, but should learn to see things from other people's point of view" (Phil. 2:3-4, Phillips). Harmony happens when everyone works at putting other people first. It is essential for Christian community and for defending the gospel.

AM I A "PEACE AT ANY PRICE" PERSON?

Unity and harmony among believers were foremost on Paul's mind, in his prayers, and on his agenda. Paul worked just as hard at the spiritual art of bringing such unity and harmony into the church as he did at preaching the gospel where it had not yet been heard. Are unity and harmony foremost on our minds? Or do we run a mile at the first hint of trouble? Are we "peace at any price" persons, or are we belligerent fighters who take pride in causing rifts and divisions ourselves? He encountered complaints and arguments throughout the fledgling churches he ministered to. And not just between Jew and Gentile. There were fights between Gentile and Gentile. Even in his beloved Philippian church, Paul discovered trouble between disciple and disciple, leading woman and leading woman (see Phil. 4:2).

I would love to ask Paul, "How do you play peacemaker and counselor, and how do you help mend fractured relationships?" He would tell us it's an art—a spiritual art. **It takes practice to become a skilled peacemaker, and it takes the Spirit of unity and harmony, working through His people, to mend fences and to turn enemies into friends.** But the Spirit doesn't do it on His own. He chooses to work through the very people who can cause trouble themselves. Transformed people. Christian people. Ordinary people such as you and me.

So how are we to get along with people in the church? Ephesians 4:3 commands us to **"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."** It starts by developing the spiritual art of harmony—in other words, by becoming a peacemaker. It's being able to promote love and unity through the bond of peace for the sake of the Body of Christ and Christ Himself. What are you doing in the middle of your disagreements, conflicts, and intolerances to promote harmony? Ask God to give you a generous spirit to affirm and love people who do things a little differently than you do—that's what the spiritual art of harmony is all about!

A PEOPLE-PLEASER OR A Bulldozer?

Adapted From Women who Wound | Sue Edwards & Kelly Matthews

Do you tend toward people-pleasing or bulldozing? Why not seek a middle ground? Wise women strive to be peac

IDENTITY ISSUES

In conflicts, our opponent can label us as too sensitive, bossy, or driven, or that the conflict was caused by something we did or failed to do. These accusations can cause us to question ourselves, even when we know our identity is based in Christ.

Stone, Patton, and Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project list three core identity issues that concern us when we find ourselves in the midst of conflict: Am I competent? Am I a good person? Am I worthy of love? If our identity is threatened, we will probably react poorly in the conflict.

They also suggest that we can fall prey to extreme “all-or-nothing” thinking; either we are completely competent or hopelessly incompetent, roughly good or horribly bad, and worth loving or worthless. An emotionally healthy woman grounds her identity in Jesus and works to understand when identity issues are making her overly sensitive.

In addition to a healthy self-image based in Christ, an emotionally healthy woman must guard against pride, a sin leading to qualities that render her vulnerable in conflict.

THE SUBTLE SIN OF PRIDE

How would you identify someone who is proud? Proud people boast and name drop. They feel superior. They think the whole world revolves around them. It is easy to recognize these people as proud.

But pride is also a subtle heart attitude that sneaks up and grabs us before we know it. This is the kind of pride Christian leaders battle. It takes various forms: insisting on our own way, believing we are indispensable to God’s work, and thinking different is wrong. Pride is thinking we alone know how to fix others. Proud people expect grace but seldom extend it. Pride is who we are when we don’t depend on God and most of us disguise it effectively.

Our first order of business if we want to serve Jesus well is to be ruthless in our pursuit of emotional health. Do whatever is necessary to be healthy from the inside

out. Two unhealthy qualities that stem from pride can hinder a woman's effectiveness in resolving conflict: people-pleasing and bulldozing.

PEOPLE-PLEASERS

People-pleasers are enslaved to flawed beliefs, feelings, and behaviors that make ineffective peacemakers. People-pleasers are approval addicts. They want everyone to be happy—peace at any price.

Is it wrong to want to please people? No, the Bible instructs us to care about the needs of others, to be considerate and kind. Societies function well when people are civil, honest, even heroic as they interact with others. But pleasing people has a negative side too. It's easy to believe that our primary interest is glorifying God when really a higher goal is our own self-interest, being liked, and feeling good about ourselves.

Lou Priolo labels people-pleasing as *idolatry*, a two-sided coin: one side involves neglecting God and the other side involves replacing Him with a cheap substitute, in this case people. When we desire the accolades of people more than God or we fear the rejection of people more than the displeasure of God, then we are people-pleasers. Many Christian women unconsciously fall prey to people-pleasing, an insidious form of pride.

WHAT TRAITS TYPIFY PEOPLE-PLEASERS?

1. PERFECTIONISM.

If we are perfect and if our work is perfect, then everyone will love us and no one will criticize us, right? The problem is that we are finite humans in process. Until we accept that truth about ourselves and others, and give up perfectionism, we cannot thrive in ministry.

The cost of perfectionism is that we judge ourselves and everyone around us with an impossible standard that breeds discontent. Perfectionists resist delegating and waste time focusing on details, missing the main things—death to effective leadership.

2. INABILITY TO SAY "NO."

Christian women are notorious for overcommitting and feeling like they never do enough. We are taught to serve, and serving is good unless we serve to be accepted and appreciated by people. If that is our motivation, we are easily manipulated, abused, and stressed.

My near burnout occurred slowly - like the frog in the pot. I'm told if you put a frog in a pot of cold water, he won't jump out. If you gradually increase the heat, he adjusts - until you can boil him to death and he doesn't even know. Stress creeps up until you find yourself backed into a corner of commitment. In that corner, you are especially vulnerable if conflict erupts. I learned the hard way to say "no."

Stress is a dangerous ingredient in conflict and can hurt or kill us physically. Monitor your stress.

3. DISHONESTY.

People-pleasers are dishonest, not morally, but socially. If you care too much about pleasing people, you won't honestly tell them what you think. You can't help people on self-destructive paths because you are too concerned that they might reject you. Honesty is a prerequisite quality for skilled peacemaking.

4. DEFENSIVENESS AND OVERSENSITIVITY.

My natural tendency is to be a people-pleaser, for years resulting in oversensitive defensiveness when I was criticized. Fortunately I married a man who loves me unconditionally. He helped me trust Jesus, accept myself, and leave people-pleasing behind. People-pleasers must control their thoughts and emotions, allowing for productive solutions. Oversensitive defensive women sabotage the peacemaking process before it begins.

5. EASILY MANIPULATED AND EXPLOITED.

When strong women get wind that you are a people-pleaser, watch out. They seem to sense when you are vulnerable. Leaders look for ways to empower others, but they do so from a position of strength and not weakness. Adversarial women are like sharks. If they smell fear, they will bite. If they have an agenda, they will flatter you to see if they can manipulate you. If you are too eager to please for the wrong reasons, they will know and lose respect for you.

6. PEOPLE-PLEASERS AND CONFLICT

Most people-pleasers will go to any length to avoid conflict. They assume that all conflict is destructive because it includes disagreements and differences.

As a new bride, I desperately wanted to be the perfect Christian wife, but I bottled up each irritation and insensitive action, until my husband said or did the one "camel's back" thing, and then I exploded, spewing what I had saved up for months.

As I studied the Bible and was mentored by wise women, I learned to express my complaints and irritations in small, appropriate doses. These lessons have served me well in marriage and ministry.

THE CURE FOR PEOPLE-PLEASING

The cure is simple. Perform for an audience of One. Carly Fiop writes, "Learning to please God instead of man is the greatest remedy to the problem of pleasing man ... The desire to please man above all else is to be replaced with the desire to please God above all else... The love of man's approval is to be replaced with the love of God's approval."

We have learned that when your main concern is pleasing God, you actually please more people. They respect you for your inner strength and your authentic walk with God.

BULLDOZERS

On the other end of the spectrum from the people-pleaser is the bulldozer. These women are tough, sometimes too tough. When a woman complains that the event was not undergirded with enough prayer, the potato salad was sour, or the bus driver was rude, the bulldozer's response is, "Get a life!"

1. BULLDOZER'S WATERLOO

A bulldozer is likely to ignore conflict, determining that it's not worth her time or effort. Bulldozers are easy prey for well-meaning women who create huge problems. Yes, it's infuriating to stop important work for the Lord and deal with these seemingly petty issues. But if you don't, the conflict will probably mushroom and you'll be sorry.

2. "VELVET-COVERED BRICKS"

John Maxwell calls the best leaders "velvet-covered bricks" – not people-pleasers or bulldozers – strong on the inside but soft on the outside.

Velvet-Covered Brick leaders are not afraid to deal with conflict in order to iron out an unhealthy situation. By actively addressing problems, they are peacemakers as opposed to peacekeepers. At the same time, such a leader remains open to the perspective of others. Although supremely confident, a wise leader knows the fallibility of his or her judgment, and they turn an attentive ear to those who share differing opinions.

Now there is a picture women can relate to! Discard your tendency toward people-pleasing and bulldozing and seek to become a "velvet-covered brick."

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Do you tend toward people-pleasing or bulldozing? If you fall into one of the extreme categories, you will need to counteract these tendencies and learn to think and act differently not just when the conflict arises, but every day. We suggest that you work on peacemaking in your everyday relationships with family, friends, and coworkers.

HOW WE use our words

From Just Between Us | Adriana Hayes

Thankfully, there is one open letter that is not based on opinion and will never leave you second guessing what you should say to someone who is hurting or in response to someone who has hurt you: the Bible. It's God's open letter to us and it's filled with wisdom and advice on how to use our words.

- **Colossians 4:6** says, "Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person."
- **Ephesians 4:29** says, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear."
- **Proverbs 16:24** says, "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones."
- **Proverbs 15:1** says, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

I'm challenging myself to allow these communication tips that come from God's Word guide my responses when people talk to me about my pain. I need to remember that showing them God's love is more important than protecting my feelings (Col. 4:6 and Prov. 15:1). And when I feel flustered about what to say to a friend who is hurting, I'll remember the guidelines I've been given in Ephesians 4:29 and Proverbs 16:24.

Feelings and opinions easily change, but the truth of God's Word will never fail to provide comfort to the hurting and grace to the misinformed.

Conflicting Opinions, WHO'S RIGHT?

From Just Between Us | Laura Sandretti

Christians often have conflicting opinions on many issues. So, who's right? The truth is, following Jesus is less about who's right and more about what's right.

Being on both sides of who's right has taught me that following Jesus is less about *who's* right and more about *what's* right. Having been both the judge and the judged has helped me realize, although I may not always be able to discern who's correct, I can do what's correct. How do we do what's right when other Christians (including the one looking back at us in the mirror) are so concerned with who's right?

ASK FOR HUMILITY

The more I learn about Greek, Hebrew, and hermeneutics, the more I realize how little I know. I read Isaiah 40:12, "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?" and see how small I am, how little I know and how big God is. Yet in an instant, I will accuse others of being wrong about God, the Bible, and how they are living their lives. I can become so arrogant that I subconsciously believe I have single-handedly and unmistakably unraveled issues Martin Luther, Augustine, and Calvin could not resolve. How do I do what's right? By continuing to ask God every day to keep me humble because pride and arrogance can so easily be our default without even realizing it.

ASSUME THE BEST

When I was on the wrong side of who's right, I had less than Christ-like feelings toward those accusing me. Who were they to question my theology, heart, and faith? But when the Lord challenges us to do *what's* right, we need to look at those

who we think are wrong or who think *we're* wrong in a more compassionate light. God reminded me when I was accused of being wrong that those who were questioning me, loved Him too. They loved God's Word as much as I did. Although I wanted to demonize the people who were judging me, God reminded me that their intentions, hearts, and motives were probably good. And even if they weren't, only God is able to judge hearts (Rom. 2:2-3). When we assume the best about those we're judging or those judging us, who's right becomes inconsequential and we are able to focus more on *doing* what's right instead.

AVOID WRITING

What's right when we don't agree on who's right? I have learned that doing what's right means doing the uncomfortable; talking face to face with those who are upset with us or with whom we are in a holy disagreement. No matter who is right or wrong, as believers, we need to have the courage, mutual respect, and love to talk to each other in person whenever possible. There are too many things that can be misconstrued when we send a message or email (no matter how many smiley faces we use). When we type a text or email, we also tend to say things we would not have the courage to say in person, and as a result, we can end up causing irreparable pain and damage. After you pray, do what's right and meet face to face and trust the Holy Spirit with your words or with your silence.

ALLOW GOD TO FINISH

A long-time friend told me I had overtly disobeyed 1 Timothy 2:12 when I taught at the weekend services at our church. I asked her if we could meet. We talked, cried, and prayed for two hours, then parted ways with warm smiles and an amicable hug. Later, however, my friend messaged me that she was still struggling with my theology and decision. I was admittedly frustrated. I didn't want to keep defending myself for a decision I had reached with much fear and trembling and only after much consternation, prayer, and time in the Word. It was clear, however, I was not going to convince my friend of anything and God reminded me later that I had prayed about it and didn't need to. Sometimes after we've met face to face, we do what's right by praying for all parties involved, asking God to reveal any truths He wants *us* to learn, and then trusting Him with the rest.

ALWAYS BE NICE

Perhaps the most important “what’s right” when we don’t agree on who’s right, is to speak the truth *in love*. Sarcastic, condescending, arrogant attitudes and words are not the mark of mature believers—regardless of who’s right. When I have found myself with a pit in my stomach, and my face feels hot and I’m shaking, I know it is time to pray. When I speak out of anger or anxiety it’s difficult for me to be nice. If I can’t speak kindly to other *believers* when we don’t agree, how can I be a witness to a lost world? When I have been hurt by believers I have had the tendency to feel they should know better. However, I have had to remember and ask God for help living out Colossians 3:13: “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

What do we do when we don’t know who’s right? We accept that there are more things we don’t know than we do. We acknowledge we may never know who’s right, but we always have the opportunity to do what’s right. Doing what is right is never getting even or having the last word. Doing what’s right is difficult, unpopular, and usually feels very unsatisfying, but when we become consumed with who’s right, even in Jesus’ name, we risk not only doing what’s wrong, but also hurting those for whom Christ died in the process.

Resolving Conflict

When a conflict arises, the feelings are usually anger and hurt. Here are several suggestions for resolving conflict that may help friendships heal.

Q: A friend and I have had a conflict. I am afraid that our friendship will end because of it. How can we work this out?

A: When a conflict arises, the feelings are usually anger and hurt. Neither person may be willing to make things right. There can be a deadlock and a friendship may be destroyed. It is important to make some pre-conflict decisions that will help your relationships withstand difficulties.

EPHESIANS 4:26 tells us not to let the sun go down on our anger. **SECOND CORINTHIANS 5:18** tells us to be ministers of reconciliation. How are we to do that if we won't reconcile with a friend?

Even though we know these truths, human beings are not perfect. We forget God's Word, or decide not to heed it. Matthew 5:23-24 commands us to be reconciled to a brother before we can give a gift at the altar. According to God, mending a break in a friendship is serious business.

Years ago, I was offended by a friend. We made a few efforts to resolve our differences, but our resolutions did not hold up long. She would call me for lunch, but I delayed accepting her invitations. I told myself that I was "just not ready." However, God's Word says, "Do not merely listen to the word...do what it says" (Jas. 1:22). Finally, one day I realized that, under God, I must open up and step up. I called her and we worked it all out. In fact, our friendship is better than ever. I regretted that I let myself drift, not only personally, but also Scripturally.

A few years later, another friend and I had a misunderstanding. The same cycle of avoidance began. This time I asked forgiveness and was ready to forgive and move forward, but she would not respond. I believe that she let herself get caught in the same trap that I had...she let fear get the best of her, causing her heart to be blocked.

According to God, mending a break in a friendship is serious business.

Having been on both sides, I would like to offer several suggestions that may help you and your friend resolve your differences and heal your friendship.

1. WHEN SOMEONE OFFENDS YOU, IT'S OKAY TO FEEL WHATEVER EMOTION YOU NEED TO FEEL.

Just don't let the emotional flow cause you to sin and find a cut-off point for every bad feeling. *Enough anger is enough. Enough hurt is enough. Enough fear is enough.* **However, there is never too much love.** None of us can afford to resist it when love is sincerely offered.

2. WHEN SOMEONE HURTS US, SELF-PROTECTION CAN BECOME MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANYTHING ELSE, EVEN OBEYING GOD.

We may even decide to hate in order to protect our hearts. It may not be our intention to be hard-hearted or cruel, but when we refuse to forgive and work toward resolution, we can't resolve conflict. Many marriages, as well as friendships, have ended because of the fear of future hurt, which is the greatest deterrent to renewal. Self-protection can hold many a heart hostage for life. It is a selfish position.

3. IF WE ARE GOING TO HAVE ENDURING FRIENDSHIPS, WE MUST FULLY ACCEPT THE FACT THAT NOBODY IS PERFECT.

I would rather have love from an imperfect person than not have the love at all. Love is always worth the risk. You may have to work hard on a relationship, but with God, the possibilities and blessings are endless.

4. THE DESIRE TO BE RIGHT CAN STICK US.

Ask yourself, "Would I rather be right or love and be loved?" Your choice will not only affect the relationship that has been damaged, but the effects of your decision will spill over into every relationship that you have, for good or for harm.

5. IF YOU HAVE A FRIEND WHO REFUSES TO BE OPEN, IT MAY BE THAT SHE'S GIVING INTO THE TEMPTATION TO PUNISH YOU.

If your conscience is clear before God and you have made the effort, you are under no obligation to receive the punishment. All friendships that have been broken may not be fixed because not every person involved will choose to make the effort. This is a reality you may have to face.

SIDE QUESTIONS

Ask Yourself:

- Am I wrong and do I need to own my mistake?
- Is there a lesson to be learned?
- Do I know the Scriptural teaching regarding the current issue?
- If the other person will not resolve the conflict, will I try more than once?

WORDS OF Blessing

From Just Between Us | Shelly Esser

How often do we deny others the powerful blessings of our words, by simply not sharing them? Imagine a world where words were used to lift up and not tear down.

Our words are powerful and Scripture has a lot to say about them. Particularly about what kinds of words we're to express. They can be used for good or evil, to build up or tear down—or they can forever change someone's day, week, or life. **PROVERBS 18:21 SAYS, "THE TONGUE HAS THE POWER OF LIFE AND DEATH,"** (GW). Our words can literally bring *life*. That's certainly been true for me. There have been countless times when I've been struggling or down in the dumps of discouragement or despair, when someone comes along with just the right verse (God's Word) or word of hope—the kind of words that give me the strength to do one more day, one more task. *Life!*

Unfortunately, every time I go on social media, I am shocked at the hurtful, negative, and ugly words that are spewed out publicly for all to see. Words that tear down, that have absolutely no benefit to the reader—and how they must bruise the heart of the one they're directed at. Words that are not bringing life, but death. Words that can permanently break someone's fragile emotions or self-esteem, forever damaging them—words that cannot easily be erased from memory. They are not words that bless.

Before we know it, that climate of ugliness, complaining, etc. can seep through to our own hearts spilling out onto our families, friendships, coworkers, and people at church, to name a few. **WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE IF WE STARTED TO INTENTIONALLY USE OUR WORDS FOR LIFE IN OUR CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE? TO BECOME GENEROUS WITH WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT AND BLESSING—WORDS THAT LIFT UP AND NOT TEAR DOWN?**

- Would I think before I speak?
- Would I think about how stingy I can be with my words when it comes to building up others?
- Would I think about how careless my words are?

- Would I think about the affect my words will leave behind once I've spoken them?
- Would I think about what my words do not only to the person they're directed to, but to the person listening?
- Would I think about what the words I say to others would do to me if I heard them?
- Would I think of the tone of voice I use?
- Would I think about how many times I *think* positive things about others, but never tell them, never bless them?
- Would I think about how I can intentionally look for people to encourage every day, especially those people right under my nose (my family)?
- Would I think about the need to pile on more encouragement rather than no encouragement or destructive words?

Especially in today's climate of ugly words, think how powerful it would be and what a witness it would be to speak words of life, of blessing, of encouragement instead? **PEOPLE ARE HUNGRY FOR SOMETHING POSITIVE; THEY ARE CRAVING TO BE BUILT UP. THEY ARE LONGING TO BE BLESSED BY ANYONE.** What an amazing opportunity we have to speak into that vacuum, to bring life through our words. Our words are powerful! I'm so glad we took the opportunity to bless my mom with life-giving words—words she will treasure in her heart forever.

Boundaries

Adapted from *Boundaries and Relational Intelligence* | Tina King

Appropriate boundaries actually increase our ability to care for others, they help us maintain emotional balance, preventing burnout and resentment. Boundaries can also help you build trust, safety, and respect in relationships. **Knowing and communicating your boundaries is an act of love.** It empowers you to navigate social situations confidently and protects your energy, ultimately fostering healthy and fulfilling relationships. Respect for the boundaries set by others also helps build trust as well as intimacy.

SETTING HEALTHY BOUNDARIES IS NOT SELFISH!

One sure sign of boundary problems is when your relationship with a person has the power to affect your relationships with others.

PUTTING THIS INTO PRACTICE:

- Where do boundary issues lie in my own life?
- Where do I give too much? (leaving me feel zapped or run-over)
- Take too much or not carry my weight/ (Am I a good friend)
- Am I adept at fostering good, solid friendships with people who are healthy and capable of reciprocity?
- Do I easily recognize when I can execute a healthy boundary and take back control over a situation I am in? (this takes practice)

WHEN IT COMES TO MINISTRY RELATIONSHIPS...

2 CORINTHIANS 1:4 Comfort with the comfort with which we are comforted...

This is telling us something. We need to be comforted before we can comfort. Look honestly at yourself as well as your relationships and see that you are in a good and healthy position to serve before you dive in.

A prayerful look at your relationships will determine whether you need to begin building boundaries with some of your friends and family. Be a good example, our children often look to our lives and ascertain how to react or respond. Consider,

do I have some ways of reacting that need to be changed? What am I teaching my children about friendships, boundaries and healthy relationships?

By setting boundaries you may save some important relationships from declining and save your own health and well-being in the process.

THE LAW OF POWER

We cannot change another person. A complaining spouse, in effect, keeps a problem going. Accepting someone as he is, respecting their choice to be that way, and then giving him appropriate consequences is the better path. When we do this, we execute the power we do have, and we stop trying to wield the power no one has.

CONTRAST THESE WAYS OF REACTING.

Before Boundaries

"Stop yelling at me!"

"You've got to stop drinking, it's ruining our family."

After Boundaries

"You can continue to yell if you choose to but I will not be in your presence when you act that way."

"You may choose not to deal with your drinking if you want but I will not continue to expose myself and our children to this chaos."

These are examples of taking power back over what you do have power over-YOU.

ASSESSING YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

It's important to periodically evaluate and assess the relationships we have as well as our own behaviors and participation in these partnerships. It's also vital that all parties understand the significance of being a good friend, even as we seek to have good friends.

The bible says, Proverbs 18:24 A man who has friends must himself be friendly. As much as we need to assess the other people in our lives, we also need to assess ourselves to ensure that we are being the very person we desire to attract.

"IF YOU WANT THE BEST, BE THE BEST BECAUSE THAT IS WHAT THE BEST WANT."

This doesn't mean that if we are not 100% all the time we are not a good friend or if someone is in crisis or struggling with something they are not capable of being a good friend.

This is the nugget of healthy supportive friendships; we can carry one another's burdens and provide much needed strength when our friends need it and they do the same for us. Galatians 6:2 Fulfilling the law of Christ.