

**WHEN RELATIONSHIPS GO SOUTH:  
REBUILDING  
MATTHEW 5:23-26; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21  
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An alcoholic in recovery came to the realization he really had hurt his family.

His wife had laid awake how many nights,  
wondering when or if he would come home.  
And then she'd pretend to be asleep,  
so she wouldn't have to deal with him when he was drunk.

He never made it to his son's sports games,  
because he was drinking.

His daughter had to pick him up at a bar  
when the bartender would not give him his car keys.

They all learned to fear his angry explosions, tip-toeing around him.

They all pretended to not know he was drinking like a fish,  
even though the mints he ate could not cover the smell of liquor,  
and his behavior was clearly out of control.

They lived with the income that was restricted by his lack of dependability on the job.  
When you have a hangover and call in sick that many mornings,  
you don't move up the ladder.

It was only when he totaled the family car against a tree and woke up in the hospital  
that he faced the fact that his drinking was out of control.

He started going to Alcoholics Anonymous.

And as he worked his way through the 12 steps.

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol –  
that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives  
over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being  
the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Then he came to steps 8 and 9.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed,  
and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible,  
except when to do so would injure them or others.

He realized the harm he had done.

So he went to his wife, his son, his daughter, one at a time.

He confessed his sin,  
admitting that he had hurt them with his alcoholism.  
He named specifics of what he had done or not done,  
owned it completely,  
apologized and asked for their forgiveness.

Then he said,

"I know I can never undo what I did.

I can't take it back,

and you can't pretend it never happened.  
 And I can't really make up for it.  
 But is there anything I can do to try to  
 build a new relationship with you now?"

And he set out to prove himself,  
 through days, weeks, months, and years of living soberly and responsibly.

Some of you know that story personally, from the inside.  
 Others of you might not have any sort of substance addiction in your family.  
 But the truth is, we're all recovering from an addiction to sin.

Every single one of us.

The Bible says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

(Ro.3:23a)

All.

And, at one time or another, our sin has played out in our lives in ways that  
 hurt other people and strained or broke relationships.

And it would be worth our while,

it would be beneficial to our spiritual recovery,

if we followed those same steps that are used in AA.

They're all based on Scripture.

And they work.

Jesus called his followers to rebuild broken relationships.

He said there was nothing more important than loving God and loving other people.

And he even said you cannot separate the two.

If you truly love God,

you must love people who are created in his image.

He even went so far as to say religious ritual might sometimes have to wait  
 while we work on a relationship with another person.

### **MATTHEW 5:23-26**

There are some really practical reasons to work things out.

For instance, so you don't get taken to court and perhaps lose!

If it gets into a court battle,

you have no opportunity to take the initiative,

and you lose a lot of control over your situation.

But Jesus was not just dishing out practical advice.

Jesus wanted his followers to live in loving relationships.

This text faces the reality that followers of Jesus sometimes suffer broken relationships.

Jesus did not foresee us living out perfection where relationships never break.

Oh, he *called* us to that.

And his Spirit gives us all the guidance and power we *need* to live that out.

And hopefully, as we grow in Christ, we do get better and better.

But Jesus knew... he knew.

So he went on to answer the question of what we are to do when relationships *break*.

Over the last few weeks we've talked about several important steps to take:

You need to memorize three sentences made of three words each

that are supernaturally powerful when stated with real conviction:

I am sorry.

I was wrong.

Please forgive me.

Say them after me:

I am sorry.

I was wrong.  
 Please forgive me.  
 Those will take you a long way down the road.  
 There's the necessity of confessing our sin,  
 admitting when we've treated someone poorly.  
 We talked about repentance,  
 the change of mind that redirects a life into a U-turn.  
 We talked about apologizing and asking for forgiveness.  
 And being ready to forgive others,  
 turning loose of our sense of offense and desire for revenge..

But as important as all those things are,  
 and they are very important,  
 there will still be a need to do the hard work of rebuilding the relationship.  
 Jesus said, "Go be reconciled to them."  
 Go be reconciled.  
 Rebuild the relationship.  
 Loving relationships are so important,  
 later in Matthew Jesus quoted from the Old Testament and said,  
 "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." (Ho.6:6; Mt.9:13)

Rebuild the relationship.

The deeper the hurt,  
 the more severe the damage,  
 the more time and effort it will take to rebuild.  
 If you accidentally do damage to someone's storage shed,  
 you can fix that fairly quickly, rebuilding whatever is broken.  
 But when those airplanes flew into the twin towers of the World Trade Center...  
 rebuilding took millions of dollars and years of effort.  
 And many people are still trying to rebuild their lives.

Rebuilding a relationship means, at best, starting over from scratch.  
 Often it means much more work than that.  
 It can mean trying to undo the harm that was done.  
 Making amends.

Sometimes it just means taking the initiative in the relationship,  
 working a little harder at it,  
 showing the other person that they are important to you.

Sometimes making amends means proving yourself trustworthy over time.  
 If you were caught lying,  
 if you betrayed a confidence,  
 if you cheated sexually,  
 it's not enough to just say,  
 "I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

Certainly you need to say that.  
 But then you've got to prove yourself.  
 Not just say you're trustworthy,  
 but prove it by your behavior over a prolonged period of time.  
 Trust may be given at the beginning of a relationship.  
 But trust that has been betrayed...  
 That's one of the deepest hurts.  
 Trust is not, nor should it be, easily given after that.

It's got to be earned back.

And count yourself blessed if the other person is  
giving you a chance to prove yourself.  
They don't owe that to you.  
They don't owe you anything at all.  
Remember, the one circumstance in which Jesus permits divorce  
is when trust has been betrayed,  
the terms of the covenant broken. (Mt.19:9)

So be grateful if you have the chance to prove yourself.

Sometimes making amends means getting to know each other all over again.  
The harm has not been so deep as a betrayal.  
But a distance developed between you and the other person.  
And so you have to start over, almost as if from scratch.  
Don't get frustrated and quit.  
Do the work.

Do the work because relationships with others are that important to Jesus.  
Remember, loving God and loving people are numbers one and two on his top ten list.  
And do the work because that's what God does.  
Do the work to reflect his image in you.  
God's primary work in biblical history has been the work of forgiveness and reconciliation,  
the rebuilding of broken relationships.  
The odd thing is that God is the one who was offended by our sin.  
We wronged God.  
So we *should* devote ourselves to the work of reconciliation,  
earning our way back into God's good graces.  
And, in fact, that is what every other world religion teaches.  
Earn your way into God's good graces,  
into heaven, into paradise, into nirvana, into a higher level of heaven,  
by doing these prescribed works.

You do the work.

But the Bible says God is the one who works out our reconciliation.  
In fact, he has already done it for us.  
Jesus paid the penalty for our sin on the cross.  
He bore the punishment that we deserved.  
He made amends for us.

The apostle Paul wrote,  
"While we were God's enemies,  
we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son." (Ro.5:10)

God worked "through him to reconcile to himself all things,  
whether things on earth or things in heaven,  
by making peace through his blood,  
shed on the cross." (Col.1:20)

We did wrong; we sinned.  
We owe God.  
We are the ones who should pay a penalty.  
But God did that for us in Jesus.  
That's what the cross was all about.  
Jesus paying the penalty for us, working out reconciliation.  
And now all we have to do, all we can do,

is accept that as his gift to us.  
 Have you done that?  
 Have you accepted a rebuilt relationship with God as his gift to you?  
     Or do you think you're good enough that you don't really need that?  
     Or that you're rebuilding it yourself?  
 We cannot do it for ourselves.  
 But anyone, you, me, anyone, can accept it as God's gift to us.  
 If you'd like to take that step,  
     or if you'd like to make sure you've taken that step,  
     you can do that right now in prayer.

### **PRAYER**

Lord, we know we've messed up.  
     We've gone through my days doing my own thing,  
         not really seeking out your will,  
         and when we knew your will we didn't always obey.  
 Maybe we look pretty good compared to others.  
     And maybe they think we look OK.  
     But we know we don't measure up in your eyes.  
 But we know, too, the wonderful thing you did through your Son Jesus.  
     And we want to receive it as your gift to me.  
     Thank you for paying for our sins on the cross.  
     Thank you for giving us eternal life with you through the resurrection.  
     Thank you for rebuilding our relationship.  
 Help us live into that, Lord,  
     to live each day in deeper and deeper fellowship with you,  
     every day more in love with you,  
     every day more obedient to you.  
 In Jesus' name. Amen.

When we accept that wonderful gift from God,  
     he then calls us to participate with him in the ministry of reconciliation.  
     That means seeing people differently,  
         seeing them from God's point of view.  
     And treating them accordingly.

### **2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21**

There in that last verse is Jesus' act of reconciliation,  
     working to rebuild our relationship with God.  
 And there is the call, the command, that we engage in the ministry of reconciliation.  
     "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ  
         and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."  
     "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors,  
         as though God were making his appeal through us.  
     We implore you on Christ's behalf:  
         Be reconciled to God."

Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall told this story:

There were two widowed sisters in their late 70s were living together out of financial necessity.  
 They had such a bitter fight that they stopped speaking to each other.  
 Unable to leave their small home,  
     they continued to use the same rooms and sleep in the same bedroom.  
 Chalk lines divided all rooms in the house

so that both sisters could come and go  
 without trespassing on their sister's space.  
 For years they coexisted in grinding silence.  
 Neither was willing to take the first step to reconciliation.  
 Then one night one sister got up to go to the bathroom and fell, breaking her hip.  
 The other sister, awakened by the fall and the scream of pain,  
 jumped out of bed crossed the chalk line and came to her sister's side.  
 After a few typical sister jabs at  
 why she would do such a foolish thing as trip on her own feet,  
 the sister held her foe until the paramedics came  
 and carried her to the hospital with her sister at her side.  
 In those moments of pain and darkness  
 the power of love brought reconciliation.  
 Supreme Court Justice Marshall concluded,  
 "The legal system can force open doors, and sometimes even knock down walls,  
 but it cannot build bridges.  
 That job belongs to you and me."  
 That job belongs to you and me:  
 To invite people, our friends, our neighbors, perhaps a family member,  
 to be reconciled with the God who loves them.  
 And if we want to be taken seriously,  
 we ought to be rebuilding any broken relationships in our own lives.  
 Loving God and loving people.  
 That's what it's all about.

### **SERMON NOTES:**

All have sinned, (Ro.3:23a)

So relationships will be messy.

Rebuilding the relationship is more important than religious ritual (Mt.5:23-26; Ho.6:6; Mt.9:13)

Trust betrayed is difficult to rebuild, will require proving yourself. (Mt.19:9)

God takes the initiative in rebuilding/reconciling (Ro.5:10; Col.1:20)

God calls us to a ministry of reconciliation. (2Cor.5:18-21)