

Jesus On (4):
Relationships (5:21-26)

Introduction

Welcome to Meck and a special "hurricane edition" of our Internet Campus.

We are having to cancel all of our weekend services - some of them had already been cancelled before because some of our sites are public schools that are closed and preparing to be used as evacuation centers.

And because of the weather that we're experiencing here in Charlotte we made the decision that it's just not safe to be out so we're cancelling all of our weekend services at all of our physical sites.

So we're glad that you're joining us here for the Internet Campus. A number of us came in early so that I could record this for you and we can continue our series on the Sermon on the Mount.

And also so that I could say a few words to you and to pray for the folks who've been affected by this storm and also for ourselves in Charlotte.

If this is your first time on the Internet Campus I hope that you really check it out and all of the corners and rooms.

Be sure that you say hello to one of my favorite people on the planet, Pastor Drew who is monitoring and serving as pastor for all of our Internet Campus services. So go to the chat room and say "Hi" to him and give him a hard time on my behalf. He is just a tremendous man.

If you would like to give online, obviously we're set up for that and you'll see all of the buttons through the Internet Campus portal. And we really appreciate your giving.

With all of our services being cancelled this weekend, we are more dependent on you following through with that and doing it online than ever before. So thank you in advance for your generosity.

We also have places here where you can submit prayer requests which I hope you will do and which we will faithfully pray over. So let this serve you even though you are home this weekend hopefully being very safe.

Now, with that in mind, let me take a moment before we start the next installment of this series to say a prayer for all that is happening with Hurricane Florence in our state and other states.

So please join me in prayer:

Father, I want to thank you so much for your love, for your concern. We pray for people who are being affected by Hurricane Florence. We pray for safety. We pray for protection. We pray that You are with the emergency responders who are attempting to serve and to save - that You would watch over them as well. There are so many people out trying to restore power and trying to care for those in need. So we just pray for all that is happening right now in North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia. And also I pray, Father, for those in Charlotte and particularly for those who are in the Meck family and people who may be affected by power outages or maybe a roof leaking, wind damage or a tree that falls.

So I just pray for safety for all. And for any needs that do arise, that we as a community of faith would circle around and wrap our arms around all of those in our orbit in need and serve them at the point of their need. And I pray that you would bring those needs to our attention. I pray all that in the name of Jesus. Amen.

When I was eight years old, I went to a YMCA summer camp for two weeks.

I'd never been away from home before, much less to a camp, and I was really excited.

My parents dropped me off, I was assigned to a cabin and settled in for the time of my life.

There was only one problem. There was this one kid who kept bugging me. He teased me, he called me names, he messed with my sleeping bag when I wasn't around.

I got along great with all of the other kids, but this guy just had it in for me.

I didn't know what in the world to do, because I had never really encountered anything like this before. If you didn't get along with a kid in the neighborhood, you just didn't play with him.

It was simple.

But I had to live with this guy, day in and day out, and he was running the whole experience and really starting to get on my nerves.

My parents drove up for the weekend to visit me and my Dad asked me how it was going. I told him about this kid.

Then my dad said: "Have you tried to talk to him about it? Have you asked him to leave you alone?"

I said, "Yeah, and it doesn't do any good."

He looked around to see if my mom was around and then he looked me square in the eye and said, "Jim, if you've tried talking to him and he still keeps bothering you, take him out behind the cabin and have it out."

I said: "Have it out? Whaddya mean?"

He said, "Tell him to stop it or you'll knock his block off."

I said: "Can I do that? Really? You'll let me?"

He said, "Don't tell your mother, but yes."

I said, "Oh boy, thanks dad!"

It was like the greatest moment of our relationship!

As soon as all the parents left, that kid came up and started in on me just like before.

But this time, I looked him right in the eye and said, "If you don't leave me alone, my dad gave me permission to take you out behind the cabin and have it out."

He said, "Whaddya mean, have it out."

I said, "I get to knock your block off."

He said: "Really? You won't get in trouble or anything?"

And I said, "Nope."

He was very impressed. And I was kinda impressed with myself, too.

And that ended that. The rest of the week went fine.

Which was a good thing, because it never entered my mind what would have happened if the block that had come off had been mine.

A few decades later I was working my way through graduate school at a job where a guy kept bugging me.

He would talk about me behind my back, he'd steal my ideas for projects and then say they were his.

This guy felt like he was in direct competition with me, and he was bound and determined to win. I found out later that part of the problem was I was hired for the job he wanted and didn't get.

The atmosphere at the office was horrible. I dreaded going to work.

Then I remembered my father's advice...

But the marketplace doesn't work that way, does it. Neither does a marriage or a neighborhood or a church.

I needed a plan "B," just like you do.

Let me give you two big realities of life.

There will be people you will have to interact with.

You won't be able to get around it.

You're married to them. You're the father or mother of them. The son or daughter. The sister or brother. The employee or employer. The neighbor. The coach or teammate.

Unless you move to a desert island, it is a fact of life that you will have to interact with certain people.

Here's the second big reality:

There will be conflict with those people.

Maybe not all of them or in the same degree, but there will be times or instances of relational breakdown.

Tension.

Stress.

Disagreement.

Hurt.

Frustration.

Anger.

Misunderstanding.

There will be times you will NOT get along.

Sometimes it will be your fault, sometimes their fault - usually there's plenty of blame to go around for everyone involved.

But no matter who is at fault, it doesn't affect the reality of the conflict.

Now, let's take those life-truths into our next section of Jesus' famed Sermon on the Mount and see what He had to say about this aspect of relational life.

This is how He starts:

"You have heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.'

"But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell." (Matthew 5:21-22, NLT)

Okay, let's stop there.

I. Don't Give in to Hate

The first principle Jesus gives is simple, but super hard. When there is relational conflict, don't give in to hate. Don't let it escalate into hate.

To anger.

To bitterness.

Don't fight back or attack.

Don't call them names or swear at them.

Which takes all the fun out of conflict, right?

I mean, the first play we call when we cross hairs with someone is the joy, the pleasure, the pure comfort,

... that comes by going to as many people as we can and getting them on our side by trashing the other person and what they did or what they said.

And if we can't do that, we can at least privately seethe, rehearsing the offense, the anger, the hurt, until it gets cemented in our spirits.

We like calling this play, over and over again, running that ball right down the middle of our anger.

Now was Jesus saying that all anger is always bad? No.

We can say that because Jesus led the perfect life and He got angry and in very appropriate ways.

You see, there is such a thing as righteous anger.

We must also realize that anger is a human emotion that was created and given to us by God. Anger can be a natural, good, healthy and appropriate reaction to any number of situations that occur in our world.

You should get angry at injustice. You should get angry when a child is abused. You should get angry, and then allow that anger to result in action.

But regardless of the kind of anger, in every situation and no matter the action, it is wrong to let it lead to evil.

In other words, even if it is righteous, justified anger, it is wrong to let it lead to malice or revenge.

And what happens when we do? Let's say we do give into it but what then?

The offense gets bigger and bigger, our emotions get more and more hyper-charged, and the person we're upset with gets more and more vilified.

Their motives get darker, their intent more malevolent the more we build it up inside of us.

Everything inside us gets exercised, everything about the offense gets intensified, and everything about the person gets demonized.

John Bevere writes of it like the bait in a trap that ensnares us if we take it.

He calls it the "bait of Satan."

And it is bait. And it is a trap.

Because while a particular offense might be real, we don't have to be offended.

In fact, the offense isn't the point - our reaction is the point.

Just think of our language - we talk about *taking* offense, *getting* offended, *becoming* offended.

It's always on us. It's something we choose to do.

And when we make that choice, it leads to hurt, anger, outrage, resentment, bitterness and hatred.

Which results in insults, attacks, wounding, division, arguments and broken relationships.

And when we not only take offense but feed it, then all is lost.

Jesus said: "Don't do that. Stop that at the very beginning."

That's not relational repair - that's relational inflammation.

Relational breakdown.

It's setting the entire conflict up to not only be more than it is, but making it ten times harder to diffuse.

So what do you choose instead of hate? What do you choose instead of offense?

Grace.

Grace looks at people as more than what they do.

That's part of the very definition of grace. It looks at people as more than what they do; beyond what they do. It tries to empathize as to why they may have done it.

Or give them the benefit of the doubt that they didn't meant it the way you took it.

You know what's true about every other person you will ever lock eyes with on this planet?

Every one of them is marked by weakness.

When you lock eyes with someone, you can safely assume that they carry very deep wounds,

... have endured backgrounds of enormous family dysfunction,

... that they live - day-in and day-out - with areas of temptation and struggle where they are fragile and often broken.

What if you thought about that more when you lock eyes with other people?

Maybe they're doing the best they can?

Maybe they really DIDN'T mean to come across the way they did.

Maybe you just need to not worry about it, to let it go, to realize you do a lot of stupid stuff, too.

The other day, Susan and I heard a woman say something that came across as kind of cutting.

Demeaning.

Condescending.

And we really cared about the person she said it about, too.

And we started to get a little ticked about it.

And then we both thought - at almost the same exact time - the same thing.

She probably didn't realize how she sounded.

That really wasn't her character. She was probably actually trying to be encouraging.

Affirming.

She just didn't do a very good job of it.

And when we thought about it that way, it was just so easy to let it go wrapped in a blanket of grace.

Did it take giving her the benefit of the doubt about her intentions?

Yes.

Did it take bestowing some grace?

Sure.

Did it take checking our spirits right out of the gate to not let it get into offense?

To purposefully make sure we're not running to the offense side of things?

Sure.

But isn't that the way you would want people to think about what you say and do? Wouldn't you love that?

Now, let me ask you something.

How much conflict in your life would end with this step alone?

With choosing not to be offended, to not give into hate or anger, to purposefully extend grace, to give the benefit of the doubt.

Like 99%, right?

I think Jesus was on to something with his first bit of advice.

II. Pursue Reconciliation

But let's keep reading because He's got more:

"So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God." (Matthew 5:23-24, NLT)

If the first big principle is don't give in to hate or offense, the second big one is this: if there really *is* something going on that goes beyond just letting it go - in other words, if step one isn't enough - then pursue reconciliation.

Now, the setting and language Jesus uses here is really interesting and informative. Let's not miss it.

First, the setting.

He's assuming that the person He's talking to is on the spiritual side of the equation.

The one in a relationship with God.

His example has them getting ready to engage in an act of worship, of sacrifice, of giving, something on the religious side of things.

And there, in the midst of that act, He says, "Suppose you remember that there is a relational breakdown in your life."

It's kind of a set up - isn't it? He's saying, "Now, here's what those of you who say you're wanting to live for God should do."

So He creates a scenario: "You're on the God side of things, and you remember a relational breakdown. So let me tell you what you - who are on the God side of things - should do."

That's the setting. Now for the language.

Let me read it again:

"... and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you..." (Matthew 5:23, NLT)

Does that seem a little open-ended? And open-ended on purpose?

Jesus doesn't really say whether the issue is that they have something against you because of something you did or that the issue is that you have something against them based on what they did.

He doesn't clear that up. He simply says there's just somebody out there you're not good with.

And that ambiguity is important, because it means that what Jesus is going to say applies to either scenario.

Whether you are the offender or the offended.

If you're in a relationship with God, this is your next step - because you're the spiritual adult in the room.

You're the spiritually - and from that, relationally - mature one.

Or, you're supposed to.

So... you're the one to not only walk away from hate, but walk toward reconciliation.

Even if you're getting ready to go to church. Go to a Bible study. Have a quiet time devotionally with God. Read your Bible. Pray.

Seeking reconciliation is the greater spiritual act. The more important spiritual act. The one you need to do before doing anything else.

Now that's interesting, isn't it? Because a lot of us tolerate a broken relationship somewhere in our life over there, and then we're engaged with this relationship with God over here. As if somehow the two do not relate.

It's almost as though the more we pursue a relationship with God we can turn a blind eye toward this broken relationship.

And Jesus is saying that broken relationship is number one on your spiritual "To Do" list.

Number one.

Now, did you notice how you were to do this?

How you were to be reconciled?

It would be easy to miss.

Jesus said you go to the person.

You say: "Well, duh - of course. What else would you do?"

Oh, well I don't know about you but my tendency is to do anything but.

Like, go to six other people and tell them what's going on, and what they did to me, or how hurt I am, and how I know I really need to talk to them, but right now I just can't.

That's called slander.

That's called messing with the wider community.

That's called immaturity.

Jesus says: "You are to talk to one person and one person only. The one you're having issues with."

The only time that changes is if you try, and it doesn't get anywhere. Then, particularly if they are on the God-side of things with you, you bring in another person that both of you know and trust as a kind of mediator.

But that only comes later.

You don't go vomit your stuff out to half-a-dozen on the way to resolving things.

Here's what happens - you'll feel a little better because you got it off your chest, you'll have infected six others with your offense toward that person and, in the end, you probably won't even go to the person.

That's just toxic.

So how do you resolve?

You go to the person.

And here's how. I've done it a thousand times.

If you think they are offended by you - you don't know what's going on and you're sensing some distance, some hostility - just go them and say, "Are we okay?"

"Have I done anything to offend you? Because if I have, I would love to know it and talk about it and, if needed, own it and ask for forgiveness."

How do you think most people are going to respond to that?

Well, think about how you would respond.

Wouldn't you soften a bit and feel able to enter into a decent, resolving, kind of conversation?

You may feel like saying, "Well I should have talked to you about this earlier, but there's this thing that happened..." and then you just start talking about it.

Nine times out of ten I can say: "You know what I am so sorry. I wasn't even meaning it that way."

And at the end, I'll often just say: "Again I'm sorry about this. Are we good now? Is there anything else you haven't said?"

And then we're good.

Now what if you're the one who's a little out of sorts with them?

Here's something else I feel as though I've done a thousand times.

Just go up to them and say:

"Can we talk about something? I know you didn't mean it, but in today's meeting, I felt you were kind of condescending. Again, I know you didn't mean to be, but I just wanted to let you know it came across that way and I don't want to hold on to that in my spirit. But that's just how it felt to me."

Again, you see the tenor of that? You don't accuse, it's more about sharing your feelings, and giving them a safe, open door to address it.

And nine times out of ten they'll say: "Oh I'm so sorry. I did not mean it that way."

That's how you go to someone and start to resolve things.

And it's also a second way to defuse things if the first step - refusing to take the bait of offense - didn't work.

III. Don't Wait

But Jesus wasn't finished. He had one more big idea. Let me read it:

"When you are on the way to court with your adversary, settle your differences quickly. Otherwise, your accuser may hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to an officer, and you will be thrown into prison. And if that happens, you surely won't be free again until you have paid the last penny."

(Matthew 5:25-26, NLT)

So Jesus says don't give in to hate.

Pursue reconciliation.

And then third, don't delay. Don't wait on this. Don't sit on this.

And the reason Jesus gives is a very savvy one. Again, He's assuming that you're on the spiritual side of things, and the person you're having this issue with is not.

He's assuming that if both of you were on the God-side of things, it would never get this far.

So He's saying: "Listen, the person you're dealing with has no brakes on their emotions. No check on how they are feeding their sense of offense and bitterness, anger and resentment."

"If there's anything going on between you - particularly if its legit - take the lead, take the initiative, and work it out before they feed the dark side of their resentment beyond repair."

Move fast - particularly when you're the one perceived to be the offender.

And that's the final principle Jesus gives us. In all of this, move quickly.

Don't wait. Don't give it time to take root. Get the weed of conflict out before it has time to grow.

One of the things I learned to do years ago is when I'm in a meeting with staff or others, and something happens in that conversation. It may have been a rigorous or robust conversation where disagreements are being voiced which is fine.

But maybe someone gets a little out of line and puts a little too much voltage into something. And I see that they went after somebody a little too hard. When the meeting is over and everyone gets up to go, I'll say, "You got just a minute?"

And everyone gets up to go and I'll say: "I know you didn't mean it, but you were a little tough on this person or that idea. And you came across a little harsh. I'd like for you to go to them and apologize and let them know you didn't mean it. Because I think they're probably a little wounded right now. And they may even come to you but I'd love to see you take the initiative. And before day's end."

Why? Jesus' advice is to act on all of this quickly.

IV. But...

Now, I already know the emails I'll be getting, and they'll all have one question:

What if they don't want to resolve?

What if, no matter what I say or do, they refuse to talk, or try, or confess or forgive?

What if none of this works?

At some point, you may have to just let it go and know you've done all you can.

The Bible says to live with others in peace as much as you can, as much as you're able, as much as they'll let you.

At some point when you've exhausted every effort you may have to say, "I'm always ready to talk with you about this. I stand ready to pursue reconciliation. But it takes two to do this, and so I'm going to be prayerful that you'll be open to this one day. And I will certainly stand ready."

Now there's another person out there or situation where they are just habitually unsafe - constantly offended, constantly fault-finding, constantly attacking.

They are relationally at war and not safe.

That doesn't mean you start fighting back.

It just means there comes a time for separation.

This is when you've done all you can to resolve the conflict, but you aren't being allowed to by the other person.

That possibility has to be acknowledged.

Sometimes the other person is unwilling to engage in the process with you, they won't listen or meet, they won't even consider talking about it.

Or the nature of the relational breakdown is such that you have to self-protect.

When that happens, the Bible has clear counsel - take a look:

"Warn a quarrelsome person once or twice, but then be done with him. It's obvious that such a person is out of line, rebellious against God. By persisting in divisiveness he cuts himself off." (Titus 3:10-11, Msg)

If you want a contemporary word for the Bible's counsel, I would use the word "boundaries."

There comes a time when you have to relationally remove yourself from someone because they will not allow you to be in community with them.

This is rare and drastic, but sometimes you have no choice.

But this really is only when absolutely necessary.

It's never, ever plan "A", much less the first step.

Or even the second.

It only comes after every possible attempt at resolution has been made. When patterns of abuse on their part don't seem to be changing. And you just can't subject yourself to that.

But it is the last step because the goal is never separation, but reconciliation.

Conclusion

Now, if you say that even the setting of boundaries doesn't work - that they troll you, or seek you out, or won't let you separate.

Well...

That's when you find a cabin, and take them out back.

Just kidding.

Sort of.

Let me pray for us.