

## **Healthy Relationships – Welcome to the community of the Trinity**

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### **Healthy Relationships - welcome to the community of the Trinity - Chapter 1, “The Love Bridge”**

An 80 year old woman bumped into an 80 year old man in their assisted living facility. She smiled and said, 'You look like my 5th husband.' Taken back the older guy replied, 'How many times have you been married?' She winked at him and said, 'Four.' We all have a desire to be engaged in relationships, but sometimes they don't last. Often, they're not as satisfying as we hoped they would be. Some people make them look easier than they really are. But as the Facebook profile relationship option admits, 'It's complicated.' Building healthy and satisfying relationships can be tricky.

This series of messages is all about successfully navigating the long and winding road to satisfying relational connections. The Bible, God's Word, lays out the path for us....and of course, it begins with the cross of Jesus!

Let's begin by asking the question, 'What is a 'healthy' relationship?' If I asked you that question, how would you respond? I asked my daughter (who was on the phone with my wife as I began this chapter) how she would define a 'healthy relationship' and she said that it would be a 'relationship based on trust, respect and love.' Smart kid! Good thing she listened to her mother growing up! I asked Joni the same question and she smiled and said, 'Just do what I tell you, honey!' I probably should have ended the message there....but I marched on!

According to Genesis 1 and 2 God created human beings and this thing we call a relationship, so I thought it would be wise to see if he offered any ideas on the subject. In Genesis 2 God made Adam, gave him a job (taking care of the garden of Eden) and let him name all the animals. But none of those creatures would make a suitable companion for the new guy and God didn't want Adam to be lonely....so, he put him into a deep sleep, extracted a rib from his side, and used it to make a woman (a human companion) for him. Adam gratefully received God's gift (vs.23) so, Eve satisfied his need for companionship. This tells us that a 'healthy relationship' is satisfying. The two became one flesh (vs.24). They were intimate. A 'healthy relationship' has an appropriate level of intimacy. They were both naked and they felt no shame (vs.25). Adam and Eve were comfortable with each other. A 'healthy relationship' is comfortable.

There are two more attributes of a 'healthy relationship', but we discover them in Genesis 3, so we need to read on. Genesis 3:8 seems to indicate that God took a form (likely human) and walked with his children/new creatures on a regular basis. God created humans for relationship with him. He would eventually teach his kids to call him 'Father.' But Adam and Eve disobeyed God's one rule (not to eat the forbidden fruit - Genesis 2:16, 17) because the serpent (Satan) deceived them. They were made to leave the garden and were, thus, cut off from God's presence, that is, they became spiritually disconnected. So, we were created for relationship with God, first and foremost! Only when we are connected with him can all of our other relationships be healthy. When God approached them in Genesis 3:8 they hid from him and covered themselves up. They were afraid and ashamed because they were guilty of disobeying him. They felt unsafe. Using a bit of reverse logic that tells us that a 'healthy relationship' is one that is safe.

So, there we have it. A 'healthy relationship' is one that is satisfying, intimate, comfortable, safe and, most importantly, connected with/in/through God.

Let's return to Adam and Eve's 'broken connection' with God. We, often, experience 'dropped calls' using our cell phones. We hit a dead zone and the connection is lost. We may continue talking, but what we say isn't heard. So, the words can't produce any relational effect. During the Covid-19 pandemic churches have done a lot of congregating online. But that is only as effective as the internet connection allows it to be. In a similar way, the broken connection with God proved devastating for human relationships. If people don't have a genuine connection with God, they have to (relationally) 'make it up on their own' as they go along. In Genesis 4 Cain killed his brother Abel because of envy. One of Cain's descendants, Lamech, married two women instead of one. Then he fought with another man and killed him and bragged about his power. Humanity quickly descended into violence, dysfunction and relational dissatisfaction. Pretty much what we still see in the collapsing world around us!

So, how did God restore the broken connection? Well, where God had created one perfect world there were now two worlds, one perfect, the other deeply flawed. This fallen world of sin and rebellion and God's perfect realm (kingdom) of light and love. The problem being, that once of person is in the fallen world of sin (a sinner - Romans 3:23), there is no way for them to escape on their own, because only those who are perfect and sinless can live in God's realm of light and love. He/she is lost....dead in their sins! (Ephesians 2:1, 2)

Jesus entered this fallen realm of sin and rebellion to rescue God's lost. (Mark 10:45) He did for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. (John 14:6; Acts 4:12) Jesus lived the life of perfect obedience to God's law and will that we could not live. (John 6:46; Hebrews 4:15) Then, as the one perfect human being who ever lived, he gave his life in exchange for our lives. He died the death on the cross that we all deserved to die! (1 Peter 3:18; 2 Corinthians 5:21) So, that when we put our trust in Jesus (by believing in him - John 3:16, confessing our faith in him - Romans 10:9, 10, and repenting of our sins and being baptized in his name - Acts 2:38) to save us from God's wrath, all our sin is nailed to the cross of Jesus and his perfect righteousness becomes our garment. (Galatians 3:27) That's how God will see us in judgment. Innocent in Jesus! The cross of Christ is our 'love bridge!' Through it we are restored into right relationship with God (the spiritual connection we must have) and now able to build healthy, satisfying relationships with each other!

The practice of baptism shows us how that happens. Romans 6 teaches us that we are 'buried with Jesus in baptism and raised to a new life in him.' We were dead in this fallen world of rebellion. Baptism pictures us being buried with Jesus (put beneath the water) and raised up with him in God's realm of light and life! Transferred from one world to another. As Jesus told Nicodemus (John 3:3), 'born again!' Whenever you witness someone being baptized, be reminded of what God did for you by his 'love bridge....the cross of Jesus.'

One of my favorite scenes from the New Testament is the interaction (relationship) between Jesus and the thief on the cross. (Luke 23:32-43) Jesus was hung between two thieves to frame him as a criminal. One of the thieves joined in the mockery of God's Son. But, somehow, the other thief looked at Jesus (and the bizarre situation) and he saw a king! He rebuked his fellow crook, 'Don't you fear God?! This man has done nothing wrong.' (vs.40, 41) Then he appealed to the dying king, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.' (vs.43) He was restored in right relationship to his God. And before that day was out, he knew what Adam and Eve had lost.

## **Healthy Relationships - Welcome to the community of the Trinity - Chapter 2, "Relationships Restored"**

I have had the honor of solemnizing over 150 weddings during my 35+ years in ministry. Some of those relationships turned out better than others. But, I will never forget one in particular! The prospective groom and bride looked like 'Ken and Barbie.' (if you are too young to relate to that analogy, ask an older couple you know and they'll explain it to you!) It seemed like a match made in heaven. He was handsome. She was beautiful. They both were well-educated. They both had great jobs. They answered all of my premarital counseling questions flawlessly. The wedding was an amazing celebration for their families. They paid well! It couldn't have been a more magical event if Disney had been involved. So, imagine my shock when 6 months later they were seated in my office, crying their eyes out, absolutely miserable, wondering how their marriage could last another day?! Marriage isn't as easy as some couples make it look. Healthy relationships require a great deal of hard work! They certainly can be, quite complicated. It takes a supernatural energy to fully experience the fullness of joy God desires for us to live in.

In chapter one we focused on how God made the way for us to cross back into the community of the Trinity (the presence of God - the only place where truly healthy and satisfying relationships can be developed and enjoyed) through the cross of Christ - God's 'love bridge.' In this chapter we focus on the resurrection of Jesus and the power of God to build the healthy, satisfying relationships we all crave. The resurrection of Jesus is, at its heart, all about hope and relational restoration. So, let's check out Luke 24:1-8.

"On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' Then they remembered his words."

The three days between the death of Jesus and his resurrection found his disciples living in the heartache of a broken relationship. The women, who knew and loved and followed Jesus (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James - vs.10), went faithfully to carry out their errand of giving his body a second treatment in their embalming practice. I imagine their hearts were heavy at the thought of seeing the dead body of the one they longed to have back with them! According to John 20:19 the male disciples were in hiding. They still ached over their loss and feared what the future held for them. We have been in that place of grief/pain, haven't we? Someone we dearly loved died. Divorce crashed our marriage party as we never thought it would. Or we were abandoned by someone we never suspected would leave us. When my father was two years old his dad left him, his older brother (4) and their mother for another woman. That was during the years of the great depression. That must have been an agonizing and fearful experience. He never spoke to me about it. When I was about eleven his estranged father called him one night in an effort to reconcile. Dad refused. He wanted nothing to do with the man who had rejected his family years earlier. As a curious child I didn't get it. I wanted to meet the grandfather I had never known. But I think I understand better today. Sometimes severed relationships leave us broken, wounded and in pain.

It's at a time like that one wonders, 'Can love/hope live again?' It often doesn't feel like it. When the women went back and told the disciples what they had seen and what had been told them (about Jesus' resurrection) the disciples scoffed. (Luke 24:9-12) "But they did not believe the women because their words seemed to them like nonsense." (vs.11) Peter ran to check out the tomb and, indeed, found it empty. But he didn't know what to make of the scene. Even when Jesus appeared to them later (Luke 24:36-43) 'they were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.' (vs.37) "...he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it..." (vs.41) Have you ever been so afraid and discouraged that you wouldn't even believe what was right in front of your eyes?! Can you imagine God restoring feelings....or a relationship that you long ago gave up for dead?

Our only hope is to lean into the power of the resurrection. Do you believe God can raise the dead to life? The Bible clearly teaches that he raised Jesus back to life from the grave. Do you believe it? I hold to the Genesis 1:1 principle of Biblical interpretation. That verse tells us, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." There was nothing there and God spoke it all into existence. If he could do that, then there is nothing described in the rest of the Bible that is beyond belief! The one, true God holds the power of life and death. He gave previews throughout the Bible of what he would do following the crucifixion of Jesus. In 2 Kings 4:32-37 God enabled the prophet Elisha to raise the Shunammite's son back to life. In Luke 7:14, 15 Jesus raised the widow of Nain's son from his bier as he was being carried out for burial. In Luke 8:54-56 Jesus raised the young daughter of Jairus, a synagogue leader, from death. In John 11:43, 44 Jesus called the body of Lazarus from the grave after he had been dead four days! As the prophet Jeremiah prayed, "Ah, Sovereign LORD,....Nothing is too hard for you!" (Jeremiah 32:17) Do you believe God raised Jesus back to life?

The God who raises the dead can restore your relationship. The marriage that feels empty can be full of joy. Your broken parental heart can be mended. Your lost friendship can be found and brought to life. Your church can be a warm and intimate spiritual family. God can do all this and more (Ephesians 3:20, 21!) if we'll let him.

The couple I described at the beginning of this chapter wept and ached. But then they reaffirmed their marriage vows. They committed to counseling. They did the hard work of building a healthy and satisfying relationship. They leaned into the power of the resurrection of Jesus. And today they are happy together. They walk faithfully with the God who didn't give up on them. They have a beautiful family. Daily they see their relationship restored and developed. Why don't you join them?!

**Healthy Relationships - Welcome to the community of the Trinity - Chapter 3, "God's benchmarks for healthy relationships"** The IHME (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation) became well-known for its predictions about the spread of Covid-19. The modelers with the University of Washington School of Medicine tracked and forecast how many new cases of Covid-19 we could expect, how many of the sick would be hospitalized, and how many patients would end up on ventilators and/or in ICU beds. The Presidential Task Force used those projections to evaluate how our nation was doing in its battle with this pandemic.

Benchmarks for tracking progress are very beneficial. As we consider how to develop healthy and satisfying relationships, wouldn't it be helpful to be able to track how we are progressing in our various relationships? Perhaps to have a spiritual task force give us some regular feedback concerning God's assessment of our relational development? Well, it turns out that the Bible does, in fact, offer followers of Jesus some benchmarks for measuring our relationship development progress. In this chapter we focus on those helpful, spiritual metrics.

But let's begin by thinking about the typical process for developing relationships in this world. In Matthew 5:46, 47 Jesus said to his disciples, "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?" That is, it is 'normal' in this world to treat other people the way they treat you. If someone is nice to you typically you are nice to them. If someone is respectful toward you, you also show them respect. But, if someone is rude to you, you tend to reflect a similar attitude toward them. If someone ignores you, you blow them off too! In this world it is fairly common to live what you learn and give what you get in relationships. Though there are those people who are just rude and nasty to everyone! Seems like a lot of them live in New York! :)

Jesus called his followers to rise above 'the typical' in their relationships. He said, 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.' (Luke 6:27, 28) Why is that so hard? Why is it so challenging to escape the 'grip' of typical relationship building?

I think I get it. Looking back on my own experience I feel the struggle deeply. I was raised in a dysfunctional family. I was loved and provided for as best my parents could. But no family is perfect, just as no person is perfect. In our home there was isolation, manipulation, and deception. So, I grew up as a relational hermit, skilled at manipulating others and generally hiding from others. Obviously, none of those are healthy relational traits. God brought healthier people into my life. He showed me better ways. Jesus saved me from my sin and failure. God led me into ministry where I encountered his Word and Spirit as a way of life/work. I have read through the Bible more times than most you ever will! I have memorized more verses of Scripture than I ever thought possible! I have prayed more prayers and led more worship services and counseled more hurting people than I can remember. I have leaned in hard to the resurrection power of Jesus (that we focused on in the last chapter). And by God's amazing grace my relationships (with Joni and my kids and my sister and my friends and my church family, etc.) are so much healthier and more satisfying. But even after 40 years of intensive divine therapy, healthy relationships are hard for me. Which is why, parents and grandparents, Paul's instruction in Ephesians 6:4 - 'to bring children up in the training and instruction of the Lord' - is so vital for our kids. It is difficult to escape the grip of the typical (what we learn early on in this life) in relationships!

So, how are you progressing in building healthy, satisfying relationships? Jesus gives us relational benchmarks that are beyond us. I think for two reasons: 1) the higher we aim the farther we'll progress, and 2) so we'll trust him and lean into his grace for help. The first of his relational benchmarks is the Golden Rule...'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' (Matthew 7:12) That is, don't treat others the way they treat you (that's typical!), treat them the way you want them to treat you. We know that rule. But how many of us live by it...really?! It is so hard! We commonly treat others in line with how they act toward us....typical! So, if you find yourself turning heads in relationships by treating other people the way you want to be treated....you know you are really making progress toward relational health!

But Jesus didn't stop there. He added what has been referred to as the platinum rule. John 13:34, 35, 'A new command I give you. Love one another. As I have loved you, so you are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.' Wow! Don't stop with treating each other as you want to be treated. Treat each other as Jesus treated you. Jesus loved and served and

died for a world that rejected him. (Mark 10:45) When we get to the place where we are sacrificing ourselves for and serving others as Jesus laid down his life for us (and the best place to practice that kind of love is in your family and your church!), we know we have reached the highest level of healthy and satisfying relationships! That's how relationships are enjoyed in the community of the Trinity.

I remember seeing a FB post about a sheep in New Zealand from back in the early 2000's. The sheep's name was Shrek. It had been in hiding for 6 years, presumably because it didn't like the feeling of being shorn. Shrek hardly resembled a sheep. And, though he couldn't comment on his feelings, he couldn't have been very comfortable. His owner shaved 60 pounds of wool from his body. That's enough for 20 wool coats. When Shrek finally gave up his wool, he made a number of people warmer and more attractive.... and I'm guessing he felt better too! We aren't meant to live for ourselves and our own pleasure. We are meant to live in relationship. We were made to enjoy and assist each other in life by developing healthy and satisfying relationships.

The Divine Reconciliation Task Force (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) has given us relationship benchmarks in the Bible, and the perfect example in the life of Jesus for how to develop the kind of relationships which make life worth living. When you find yourself treating other people the way you want to be treated, more than that, the way Jesus treated you....you know you're on the right track! So, as Jesus told his disciples, 'Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.' (John 13:17) And your relationships will show it! In the chapters to come we will focus on the specific relationship traits that will enable us to develop truly healthy and satisfying relationships.

**Healthy Relationships – Welcome to the community of the Trinity - Chapter 4, “The Key Ingredient – Humility”** Philippians 2:5-8, “In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: ‘Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing, by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!’”

When I was a teenager I was invited to a party and asked to bring a snack to share. My mom had just made some cocktail wieners in a delicious (tasted like barbeque) sauce, so I asked if she would make that for me to take to the party. She was glad to comply. I went off to do some homework. When I returned to the kitchen mom had the wieners and crockpot out along with a jar of grape jelly and a bottle of mustard. I asked what the condiments were for. She said, “They’re for the sauce.” I was stunned! I could not have imagined that the combination of grape jelly and mustard could produce the delicious sauce I was so excited about.

Do you have a favorite recipe? Is there a key ingredient in it, that most people wouldn't guess? You may enjoy blowing their minds by telling them...or probably you just prefer to keep it as your secret! As we focus on how to develop healthy and satisfying relationships, we begin with a key ingredient... the secret ingredient that most of us probably wouldn't guess. If you want to build relationships that will fill your life with joy and meaning, the trait to start with is **humility**. Nothing will transform your relationships like a massive dose of the spiritual trait – humility.

So, let's start by examining the greatest expression of humility ever lived out. Paul described it for us in his letter to the Philippian church. It was expressed, of course, by Jesus. Jesus is God the Son (John 1:1-3; 3:16; 8:58; 10:30; 14:9), co-equal and co-eternal with the Father. As the earth was immersed in rebellion and humanity languished in sin, Jesus was worshiped and adored by the angels in heaven! He was served and honored in comfort and glory and joy as he fully deserved to be. Then, in keeping with God's perfect plan Jesus left all of that behind. He left the beauty and wonder and glory and joy and comfort and worship of heaven to enter this dusty ball of rebellion as a human being. (John 1:14) Paul wrote, "he made himself nothing, by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." (vs.7) If you or I left the comfort and prosperity of our American surroundings and went to an under-resourced, developing nation to live in poverty and squalor--it wouldn't even be close to the change in circumstances chosen by the all-glorious Son of God in coming to earth. And, as if coming to a situation like that were not enough, Paul added, "he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross." (vs.8) No being has ever sacrificed more in humility and love than Jesus did to save us from God's wrath. His sacrificial death on the cross which made the way for us to be reconciled to God is literally the epitome of humility!

It is quite intimidating, but Paul challenged the followers of Jesus to imitate his humility. "In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind that Christ Jesus had." (vs.5) Do you wrestle with attitude issues? When I used to lead sessions of Christian camp years ago and the campers started to develop surly attitudes someone would yell out, 'Attitude check!' And all the campers responded, 'Praise the Lord!' Sometimes more enthusiastically than others! Do you find yourself needing an attitude check on occasion? I know I do. A good (positive) attitude is so important in life. Typically, the highest achievers and happiest people in this life have the best attitudes!

And, so, it stands to reason that a good attitude is a key to developing healthy and satisfying relationships. I recently read a book about the life and career of Johnny Carson. I always admired Johnny Carson as an entertainment personality. The Tonight Show was one of my favorite shows to watch. But, reading this book, written by his long-time friend and attorney Henry Bushkin, I discovered that Johnny Carson was not a nice person! He treated people terribly. He was a surly and demanding man. Not surprisingly he was divorced 4 times and had poor relationships with his children. He was professionally successful, but relationally he was a disaster! At the heart of his relational struggles was a prideful, negative attitude.

Of course, Jesus exemplified, and Paul challenged Jesus-followers, not just to have a 'good/positive' attitude in our relationships...but to start with the best attitude of all...an attitude of humility. So, let's think about what an attitude of humility looks like in our daily interactions with others and how it puts our relationships over the top in terms of health and satisfaction.

In leading up to his description of the humility of Jesus, Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians, "Do

nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:3, 4) So, humility involves placing greater value on the feelings/interests of the people around you instead of primarily focusing on yourself. I like to say, “Others first, God foremost.” That is, the most important being for us to please, honor, and value is God. First, we please him in all we do (Matthew 6:33), then we please, honor, and value others ahead of ourselves.

That is not the way life begins, right?! As babies and young children, we are, first and foremost, focused on self! We don't really care about the inconvenience we cause for our parents or about sharing with our brothers and sisters or friends, we want/need what we want/need when we need it! And we cry and wail if we don't get it! But with the instruction and training and love of our parents, we learn to recognize and value the needs and interests of others. We learn not to live self-centered lives but lives that value and help other people. That takes a while. It certainly doesn't happen overnight!

Jesus, through saving us from God's wrath and forgiving our sins, and through the guidance and training of the Holy Spirit Jesus imparts to us, wants to take our humility and concern for others to another level. Through friendship, marriage, parenting, service in the church, and witnessing Jesus teaches and trains us to put 'others first and God foremost.' We learn to experience more joy and satisfaction in valuing and pleasing our friends, spouse, children, brothers and sisters in Christ...and even, those who are lost and far away from God, than we do in seeking our own pleasure, honor and satisfaction. In Romans 12 Paul wrote, “Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. (vs.10) Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. (vs.15) Do not be proud, but, be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not think you are superior. (vs.16) If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. (vs.18) If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. (vs.20/Proverbs 25:21) That's hard. But that kind of Christ-like humility will make your relationships the envy of everyone who sees and experiences them! Humility, like Jesus showed for us, is the key ingredient in the recipe for healthy and satisfying relationships.

When I attended Cincinnati Bible College and Seminary in the late 1970's Skyline Chili was the preferred hangout for the student body. So, I went there. I wasn't super impressed at first, but it grew on me over time. There is a secret ingredient in Skyline chili. Do you know what it is? Cinnamon. Cinnamon!! Who would have ever thought to put cinnamon in a chili recipe?! But it definitely creates a unique flavor. Humility is the key ingredient in great relationships. It gives them a 'unique flavor.' So, follow in the steps of Jesus. Build your relationships on Biblical truth. “In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had.” Humility.

**Healthy Relationships – Welcome to the community of the Trinity - Chapter 5, “R-E-S-P-E-C-T, from me to you and back”** 1 Peter 2:16, 17, “Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love your fellow believers, fear God, honor the emperor.”

The soul song, R-E-S-P-E-C-T, made famous by the queen of soul, Aretha Franklin, in the late 1960's, was actually written by Otis Redding (when I think of him I hear 'Sittin on the dock of the bay, watchin



the tide roll away....'As an Auburn fan I want to see the Tide rolled away!) in 1965. To me, the lyrics aren't really deep or impressive, but the gist of the song is that what a man genuinely wants, at the end of the day, is the respect of his woman. Isn't that true of all of us? All we really want/need is a little respect!

I found a couple of clever quotes on the internet. The first was written for young people. "Respect your parents. They did high school and college without Google or Wikipedia." (amazing when you think about it, huh?!) The second quote could have been written for almost any adult in 2020. "Put down your cell phone and pay attention to the person talking to you! There's an app for that – it's called 'respect!'" I mean, seriously, how often do we see people staring deeply into the eyes of their cell phone?!

How would you define respect? I Googled it and found the Wikipedia definition (pretty pitiful, aren't I?). To respect someone is to admire them deeply. The synonyms offered for respect included – honor, esteem, and regard. In this chapter, as we continue with our focus on building healthy and satisfying relationships, we're going to talk about the importance of respect.

Maybe the best place to start is with the idea of respect in the New Testament. Romans 12:10, "Honor (a synonym for respect) one another above yourselves." Ephesians 5:33, "However, each one of you must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." 1 Peter 3:7, "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect..." Ephesians 6:5, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect..." 1 Timothy 3:4, 8, 11, "He (a prospective elder) must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect,...In the same way, women who are deacons are to be worthy of respect,..." Titus 2:2, "Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect,..." 1 Thessalonians 4:12, "So, that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders..." 1 Peter 3:15, 16, "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." And 1 Peter 2:17 brings those admonitions together summarily, "Show proper respect to everyone." Respect and faith in Jesus intersect seamlessly.

So, let's turn our attention to the conveyance of proper respect. If you respect our nation and the United States flag, how do you show it? You stand and sing our national anthem. If you respect our military veterans, how do you demonstrate it? You shake their hand and thank them for their service. One of my favorite movie scenes is from 'Gladiator' when Maximus, the former general, has died taking the life of Commodus, the corrupt Caesar. The sister of Commodus commands bystanders, "He was a soldier of Rome. Honor him!" And they respectfully carry Maximus from the Colosseum as the vile, deceased emperor lies there unattended. It is such a powerful reminder of the honor we owe the soldiers who defend our freedom, especially those who gave their lives in the line of duty.

If a person enters a room where you are seated, how do you respect them? You rise to your feet and offer them a proper greeting. We teach our children to speak respectfully to their parents, teachers, elders, even their peers. And if they don't, we reprimand them for the failure. We show proper respect for our governmental leaders (even if they don't conduct themselves in respectable ways) by speaking respectfully about them and praying for them. And, most importantly, we demonstrate respect for our Creator/Ruler/King (God/Yahweh) by kneeling before him and bowing our heads in prayer, and by worshiping and serving him only! When you respect someone, you find ways to admire, honor, esteem and regard them.

So, how does respect promote and develop healthy and satisfying relationships? What does ‘proper respect’ do for a marriage, family, friendship, church, or community? Simply put, respect breaks down barriers. When I respect you, it indicates that I don’t view myself as being superior to you. And when you return that respect to me, you convey that you don’t view yourself as being better than me. We meet each other on level/equal ground. That is the healthiest place for an intimate, comfortable, safe, and satisfying relationship to move forward.

Respect provides relationships with a firm foundation of mutual self-esteem. Respect is like the ‘backbone’ of a healthy relationship. It allows us to stand up straight, look each other in the eye, and engage each other on common ground. So, speak to your spouse with honor. Address your child(ren) with regard. Talk to your parents with esteem. Communicate with your elders, friends, neighbors, and leaders with admiration. And you’ll be amazed at how much healthier and more satisfying your relationships are!

Back in the 1960’s, when the song R-E-S-P-E-C-T was popular, there were two comedians on opposite ends of the ‘respect’ spectrum. Don Rickles, who grilled everyone and respected no one, and Rodney Dangerfield, who claimed that no one ever respected him (‘I don’t get no respect’). Rodney Dangerfield said he was so ugly that his own father carried around the picture of a kid that came with his wallet. He told his psychiatrist, “Nobody likes me, everybody hates me.” His shrink replied, “Don’t be ridiculous. Everybody doesn’t know you yet!” So sad! Everyone longs to be respected.

It’s been said, “Respect others. It costs you little, but it means so much to them!” Healthy and satisfying relationships thrive in an atmosphere of Christlike humility and mutual respect. That may sound too simplistic to you, but try it, and you’ll be amazed at how well it works.

**Healthy Relationships – Welcome to the community of the Trinity – Chapter 6, “The kindness and grace of a mother”** 1 Samuel 2:18-21, “But Samuel was ministering before the LORD—a boy wearing a linen ephod. Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice. Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, saying, ‘May the LORD give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the LORD.’ Then they would go home. And the LORD was gracious to Hannah; she birth to three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile, the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD.”

During the Covid-19 pandemic, with no sports on television to watch, I checked out the ESPN special about Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls run of 6 NBA championships in 8 years back during the 1990’s. It was entitled ‘The Last Dance.’ I wasn’t a big Bulls or Jordan fan (and they included some pretty raunchy stuff!), but the storyline interested me as a sports fan. One particular exchange caught my attention just before Mother’s Day. Michael Jordan had just been drafted by the Chicago Bulls. He hadn’t played in a single game yet. And the Nike shoe company invited him to their headquarters to talk about endorsing their shoes. Nike was just a runner’s shoe in those days, not the mega sporting goods outfit we know today. The big shoe companies that interested professional basketball stars were Converse and Adidas. So, MJ didn’t even want to go meet with the Nike team. But his mother, who was a fairly savvy businesswoman, told him he should go and, at least, listen to their offer. Jordan said he wasn’t going. He

recalled with a smile, 'My mother told me you're getting on that plane and you're going.' So, Michael Jordan went and met with the Nike leaders. Turns out it was a wise decision. Nike, with the help of stars like Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods became a huge sports conglomerate. And since 1984 Michael Jordan has earned over \$1.3 billion dollars in endorsements from Nike. The message is clear. Always listen to your mother....it may put a few more bucks in your pocket!

A mother's wisdom should be heeded! In fact, there is much that can be learned about building healthy and satisfying relationships from good and godly mothers. In this chapter we're going to focus on the lessons that can be gleaned from an Old Testament mother named Hannah. She was the mother of Samuel, a great leader in Israel during the period of the Judges. Hannah understood the highs and lows of faith and motherhood. And she points us toward two additional traits which help us to develop the kind of relationships God created us to enjoy.

Let's begin with Hannah's longing to be a mother. 1 Samuel 1 relates that she was one of two wives of Elkanah, an Israelite man from the tribe of Ephraim. That's not the start we were expecting, huh? Two wives? Why would Elkanah go there? Perhaps because Jacob (Israel), one of the founding fathers of Israel, had two wives? (If you're wondering how that happened check out Genesis 29) Or maybe because the period of the Judges recounts a time when the Israelites weren't exactly holding fast to the law of God? As Judges 21:25 described it, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit." The bottom-line is that sinful and fallen people are all God has had to work with since the Garden of Eden, so he leads us from where we have wandered to where he wants us to be. So, Elkanah had two wives and Hannah was one of them. His other wife, Penninah, was a baby factory. She 'had children, but Hannah had none.' (vs.2) She tormented Hannah with that painful reality. On one of their trips to Shiloh (where the Tabernacle was located) to worship, after they ate, Hannah stood to the side of the Tabernacle praying. She vowed to God that if he would just give her a son, she would give him back to the LORD to serve him all the days of his life! (vs.11) She was in such deep anguish over her situation that her lips were moving but no sound was coming out of her mouth. Eli, the high priest in Israel at that time, was sitting on his chair near the door of the Tabernacle, and he saw Hannah weeping and praying. But she appeared to him as a woman who had had too much to drink. So, he rebuked her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine." Hannah replied, "Not so, my lord. I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD." Eli, duly corrected and moved by her faith replied, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." Hannah went home encouraged and sure enough she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, which means 'heard by God.' And after she weaned him, she took Samuel to Eli, at the Tabernacle in Shiloh, and Samuel served the LORD for the rest of his life as a leader in Israel. Quite a sacrifice! But it was good for Samuel. He was raised by a grandfather figure to know and serve the LORD instead of being raised in a divided home where faith was not as significant. And it was good for Israel. After the death of Eli and his wicked sons (1 Samuel 4) Israel needed a devout leader like Samuel! In her love and kindness and grace each year Hannah made a new robe for Samuel and took it to him and we can be sure she prayed for him every night and day!

Can we spend a moment thinking about God and motherhood/femininity? Jesus told us to address God as our 'heavenly Father.' (Matthew 6:9) So, we tend to view God in masculine terms. But God created humanity, in his image, male and female. When we experience our earthly fathers' strength, through their protection, provision, and discipline, we are seeing a reflection of who God is and what he is like. But the

same is true of mothers. God created femininity and motherhood. When we experience our mother's loving and tender care, we are seeing a reflection of the love and grace and kindness which are the heart of God! God is our Father with the love, grace, and kindness of a mother. (Isaiah 66:13)

God's grace and kindness are key elements for building healthy and satisfying relationships. Think of a relationship in anatomical terms. Humility is the feet (foundation) of a healthy relationship. Respect is the spine (it enables us to deal with each other face to face) of a satisfying relationship. Grace and kindness are the arms (they enable us to hug each other) of healthy and satisfying relationships.

Grace is favor. God's amazing grace (Ephesians 2:8, 9) is the undeserved favor he gives to fallen and sinful people like us. He always treats us better than we deserve. Moms do that too! They favor their children. They treat us better than we deserve to be treated. If you think back on the days of your childhood you, no doubt, remember times your mother did things to favor you....to make you feel so special! She made sure special foods were prepared, parties were planned, excursions were hosted, and that you had what you needed when you needed it! Moms, like God, are amazing in their grace!

Do you treat the people God has placed in your life better than they deserve to be treated? Or do you simply do for them what is expected....just maintaining the status quo? When you are rudely greeted with a healthy dose of attitude, do you respond with a smile and favorable word? Do you go out of your way to please one who is hungering for your affirmation? When we grace each other, when we favor each other, when we treat each other better than we deserve to be treated we take those relationships to a whole new level.

Kindness is the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate. God and moms are all of that and so much more! Considerate of our wants and needs. So generous with their time and attention. Friendly, in terms of, doing so many little things to make our lives more satisfying and successful. There seemed to be no end to the kind gestures my mom showered upon me. As a child, I don't think I appreciated her as I should have. But when I saw Joni pour out that level of kindness on our children, I realized and appreciated how far she had gone above and beyond the call of duty. When we treat each other (your spouse, your child, your friends, your church family, your neighbors, etc.) with godly kindness, like our moms showered on us, those relationships are full of hugs and joy and satisfaction.

One of my core memories of Joni and the kids occurred in the first year we were serving at Concord Christian Church in North Carolina. Lindsay was 4 and Garrett was 3. I came home from an elders meeting with good news. We had gotten a big raise and were going to be able to survive financially. I walked into our home and the kids were playing in the dining room (in which we had only an old couch tucked against the back wall). I was not only a poor preacher; we literally had no money. Lindsay and Garrett were 'skating' on a floor covered with old newspapers wearing shoe box skates. They were having the time of their lives. Joni sat there taking pictures and just drinking in the moment. She was full of grace and kindness and our home was full of joy! It's a memory that always brings a smile to my face.

Healthy and satisfying relationships are developed as we shower each other with the grace and kindness of a mother, that comes from the heart of God. Hug someone you care about today by treating them better than they deserve and by being considerate and generous. God does that for you every day!

**Healthy Relationships – Welcome to the community of the Trinity - Chapter 7, “How to control others.”** Luke 12:13, “Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.’ Jesus replied, ‘Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?’”

Envision someone you know right now who is in trouble. They may be facing financial difficulties. Or they may be dealing with a relationship problem (maybe you can share these chapters with them!). Or they may have a serious spiritual problem. Do you think you know the solution to their problem? If you do, do you think they would be better off if they would just listen to you and follow your advice? If you have already shared with them what you think they need to do and they haven’t followed your advice, do you think they would be better off if you were in control of their thinking and choices? Sometimes it seems to us like others would be better off if they would just do what we say...if we were in control of their lives. Some parents fall into that trap. In this chapter we consider a warning against that kind of unhealthy relationship control.

Luke 12:13 focuses on a man who wanted help from Jesus in ‘controlling’ a situation in his relationship with his brother. He was likely the younger brother. In those days, the oldest son inherited twice as much of a father’s estate than any other heir. This younger brother wanted Jesus, the wise teacher, to help him get his fair share. Jesus, though he would have been the wisest arbiter available, refused to step into that relational gap. Instead, with the parable of the rich fool (vs.15-20), Jesus warned him to avoid the greater danger in this life at that moment...being consumed by greed and distraction. Jesus didn’t try to take control of his brother’s choice, nor did he think that should be the younger brother’s focus.

But that situation does raise an interesting question. Why doesn’t God exercise more control over this messed up world? He is the Maker, Owner, sovereign and all-wise Ruler of this universe. He can do anything. He knows everything. According to Romans 12:2 his will is ‘good, pleasing and perfect.’ That is, the best thing we can do in any given situation is exactly what God tells us to do (in his Word, the Bible!). If we choose to do anything God tells us not to do, or if we choose not to do something, he tells us to do – it is not going to work out well for us. There is only one way to live this life to the fullest and that is God’s way! So, why didn’t God set up this world like a huge game of dominoes? That way it would all go smoothly. Everyone would be happy and healthy and peaceful. Humans would be robots, but life would be perfect!

Why does God allow what we’ve witnessed and experienced in the past few months? Innocent people have been killed. People’s lives have been devastated by sickness and job loss and isolation because of a global pandemic. Cities have burned and children have been deprived of their education. Humans are capable of staggering evil. And it all goes back to the Garden of Eden. It all started with Adam and Eve choosing to disobey God by listening to the serpent (Satan) and eating the forbidden fruit. Why did God allow the serpent to deceive them? In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) God is the father and we are the foolish son. Why did the father give the son his inheritance knowing what he would do with it? Why does an all-loving, all-wise, all-powerful God seem to allow this planet to spin out of control? Good questions, right?

God could have created humanity (and the angelic realm as well) without free will. He could have created us as ‘robots’ who do what we were programmed to do. But God, the Creator, didn’t want that kind of ‘virtual’ world. He created us for relationship with him. He loves us and wants us to love him. But love

cannot exist without choice. True love requires choosing to engage and live in relationship. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16) God loves us so much that he gave Jesus to die to take away our sin and restore us to right relationship with him. But we must choose to believe (put our faith in) in Jesus in order to engage in that love relationship with our heavenly Father. In Matthew 11:28 Jesus bids his followers, “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.” Jesus wants to provide us with rest and peace. But we must choose to submit to him and seek him for that to happen. God invites us to choose him, so that we can live together in a healthy love relationship.

Too often we make the mistake of trying to control those closest to us. We think we know what is best for them (often we really do), and when they don’t agree and make wise choices, we try to press them into doing what we want. We need to God’s strategy. If we are going to develop healthy and satisfying relationships with our spouse, our kids, our friends, and our neighbors then we must avoid manipulation and opt instead for godly influence. Let’s try to break down what this looks like in real time.

A couple of examples of controlling others (manipulation) include the silent treatment and bullying. I once had someone give me the silent treatment (refuse to speak to me/or acknowledge my presence) for two weeks because I made a choice considered unwise. When a person refuses to talk to or acknowledge another individual who hurt or disappointed them, it produces hurt not healing, distance instead of intimacy, and division rather than peace. Relational health is always degraded by a refusal to communicate in a clear and open way with someone you want to engage.

The same is true for bullying. When you aggressively pressure someone close to you, to do what they don’t want to do, but you want them to do....you are not creating an atmosphere for a relationship that is satisfying, intimate, comfortable and safe. We don’t need or want pressure and disrespect in our homes. We need people who give us time, space, and support.

Healthy relationships are built using a strategy that pairs with free will. That’s what God does in our lives. He enlightens us with his Word. (Psalm 119:105) He influences us by his Spirit. (Galatians 5:16) He supports us with a loving spiritual family. (Galatians 6:10) And that kind of godly influence is what will serve us best in helping those we care about deeply to find their way to God’s will (what is best for them in any given situation).

So, if a Christian friend is heading down a destructive path how do you assist them with godly influence? First, pray for him/her. Ask God to guide them in ways you cannot. Beg him to speak to them by his Word and through his Spirit. ‘Pray without ceasing’ (1 Thessalonians 5:17) for those you cherish and want to see grow in the likeness of Jesus. (Romans 8:29)

Make sure you set an example of godly behavior for them to follow. If you are concerned about the words that are coming out of their mouth, make sure they hear you speak in a way that honors God and benefits others. (Ephesians 4:29) If they are going to places that will be filled with destructive influences, invite them to go with you to places where Christian values will be reinforced. Provide anyone you want to influence with the best personal example you can. As Jesus said, “Let your light shine before others.” (Matthew 5:16)

Finally, if it is possible (and, often, it is not because people on wrong paths making foolish choices have closed minds) engage them in clear and direct conversation. We sometimes refer to such conversations as interventions. Ask probing questions about their behavior and/or choices. Listen carefully to what they have to say. And openly share with them what you believe they need to hear. Ask God to guide you as you open your heart up to them. Ask him to give you just the right words to say to help them see the error of their way. Prayer....personal example....loving confrontation....godly influence is the pathway to healthy and satisfying relationships.

Joni and I enjoy watching Hallmark together. We watched a HM movie entitled 'The Bridge.' It was a two-part story (which really threw us off, because usually every Hallmark story has a happily ever after ending that doesn't leave the viewer hanging). The Reader's Digest recap – a manipulative father (the mom passed years earlier) doesn't like the direction his college age daughter heading. So, he manufactures a phone conversation to break up a relationship seemingly at the heart of her wandering. She, not knowing what he has done, heads home and relents to his controlling plan. Through a series of HM coincidences, the truth comes out and the daughter is furious. Pressed with her rebellion the father tries to use his wealth to compel her compliance. She threatens to go her own way and end their relationship. The father finally agrees to allow her to make her own choices and to go her own way. A healthier, more satisfying, and more honest relationship is launched. And they all lived happily ever after! That's Hallmark!

Manipulation can get results, but godly influence is needed to build healthy and satisfying relationships. God gives us free will so we can choose him and experience real love. Surely, we aren't so foolish as to think we can figure out a better way to build relationships than our heavenly Father has?! Choose godly influence over trying to control others, and all will go well in your relational world! Blessings!

**Healthy Relationships – Welcome to the community of the Trinity - Chapter 8, “Good fences make good relationships.”** Ephesians 5:15-20, “Be very careful, then, how you live--not as unwise but as wise making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Do you have a fence on your property? Joni and I walk around our neighborhood often and we see lots of different fences. Stone walls, plastic privacy fences, wood plank fences, wood post fences, and chain link fences. Some are quite attractive and secure, while others are in various states of disrepair and definitely needing some TLC! Joni and I have a plastic privacy fence blocking the view into our courtyard. We're not real crazy about nosy neighbors.

So, why do we put up fences? Some are decorative, but there are two basic reasons for erecting a fence: 1) for privacy (we don't want others to have an unobstructed view into our property), and 2) for protection (there some people we don't want having access to our property). Robert Frost in his poem “Mending Wall” quoted his father as saying, “Good fences make good neighbors.” Fences can be a good thing!

As we continue to focus on how to develop healthy and satisfying relationships, in this chapter we are going to zero in on the importance of boundaries. Just as good fences may improve relationships between neighbors, wise boundaries (fences) can enable us to build healthier and more satisfying relationships. In Ephesians 5:15-20 Paul shared the rationale for 4 wise boundaries to erect around our lives and relationships. So, let's see how we can build them into our friendships, homes, and churches.

The first boundary is a procrastination fence. Paul wrote that followers of Jesus are to live wisely. Specifically, that we must make 'the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.' Time passes faster than we would imagine, so we need to seize opportunities to live wisely while we can. That is, don't procrastinate when a request is made of you by someone who needs/desires your assistance. Do it immediately. Respond to the request as soon as you are able. Or you may forget to follow through. And that will disappoint someone close to you and/or lessen their trust that they can depend on you to do what you say/what they need! Intimate, comfortable, and safe relationships are greatly aided by fencing out procrastination.

The second boundary we need is a personal agenda fence. In verse 17 Paul challenged us to focus on God's will. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus taught his followers to "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." In our lives and relationships, we are to seek God's will first. First before what? Before our own personal agenda. Self-interest vies with devotion to God for control of our lives. Selfishness (what - 'I want') is problematic in our relationship with God and in our relationships with each other. If you sense that I am more interested in getting my way instead of helping you, you will be suspicious of what I say or do. If I conclude that you are just trying to use me to get what you want, then I will be disappointed by our relationship. Selfishness sours our relationships, so it is wise for us fence it out!

The third wise boundary to erect for better relational health is a detrimental influence fence. Paul wrote that Christ-followers should avoid getting drunk on wine, but rather be filled with the Spirit of God. He didn't write that Christians can't drink any wine. He condemned drunkenness. Obviously, stoned people are not going to relate to others or to God in a healthy way. But the real issue here is the substance/influence controlling one's life. If the Holy Spirit of God (who produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control – Galatians 5:22, 23) fills (controls) you, then that will make your choices/relationships decidedly healthier and more satisfying. But if we allow detrimental influences to fill (control) our lives everything and everyone is going to be affected in a negative/destructive way. How many marriages, families, churches, and communities have been devastated by individuals struggling with alcoholism, pornography, gambling, and materialism? Wise Christians build fences to keep such destructive influences out of their lives and are blessed with healthier relationships because of their discipline. And when those fences are bolstered by an effort to be filled up with the Spirit/the things of God (the Bible, prayer, worship, service, and fellowship) our relationships/lives thrive.

The final wise boundary Paul commended in this passage is an ungrateful attitude fence. He wrote in verse 20 of the value of 'always giving thanks to God in everything.' An attitude of ingratitude is a relationship killer! We all remember Charles Darwin as the father of evolutionary thought. But someone claimed that he was, also, an overly critical man. The story is told of Darwin and his wife going to a restaurant for dinner. He complained about the entire experience. There was a draft at their table. His water was warm. The soup was cold. The service was slow. The meat was overcooked. The vegetables



were mushy. The waiter was unfriendly. The meal was overpriced. As they left, the owner apologized to his wife, "I could tell Mr. Darwin was disappointed in his evening." His wife countered, "Oh no, Charles was delighted. He found something wrong with everything!" Sadly, most of us know someone like that.

An ungrateful, critical spirit is toxic to relationships. People tire of constant complaining. No one likes to be criticized excessively (even constructive criticism). If you want to see your relationships improve overnight, regularly give thanks to God, and show gratitude to those who put up with you. One of my favorite verses of Scripture is Philippians 2:14. It reads, "Do everything without complaining or grumbling." Put that Biblical admonition into practice and you'll be amazed at how much more satisfying and healthier your relationships become! Wise Christians fence ingratitude out of their lives.

When Joni and I walk around our neighborhood we can't help but notice some ratty looking and porous fences. They need to be fixed, replaced, or fortified. They are of no practical use. I don't know if Robert Frost's dad was totally right....that 'good fences make good neighbors.' But I do know the Apostle Paul had it right when he suggested that good fences/boundaries lead to healthier and more satisfying relationships. So, with God's help, let's start building those fences today!

**Healthy Relationships – Welcome to the community of the Trinity - Chapter 9, "Mercy, mercy, mercy!"** Matthew 18:21, 22, "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive by brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'" Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you."

It's been said that there are three key factors involved in the desirability and swift sale of a property.... location, location, location! Billy Graham was fond of saying that there are three key factors involved in conducting a successful revival....prayer, prayer, and prayer! In this chapter we consider the three key factors which are at the heart of healthy and satisfying relationships....mercy, mercy, mercy! Let's unpack the value and importance of mercy/forgiveness in our relationships.

Jesus was teaching his disciples about the need to deal seriously with sin. And Peter, picking up on the need for forgiveness, asked Jesus if the willingness to forgive a brother or sister who sinned against him seven times in a day would be sufficient. He, no doubt, expected to be highly commended by the Master because the rabbis of that day taught that God's expectation was to forgive someone who sinned against you only up to three times. Peter offered to double that and throw in an extra 'mercy' just for good measure! Jesus stunned Peter (and the other disciples) by replying, "...not seven times, but seventy-seven times (or seventy times seven – seemingly limitless mercy!)."

Then Jesus followed that statement up with a parable about an unmerciful servant. (Matthew 18:23-35) This man owed his king a debt of ten thousand bags of gold. It was a debt he couldn't possibly repay. So, the king ordered that the man, his wife, his children, and all he owned be sold to recoup as much of the debt as possible. The man begged for mercy assuring the king he would pay back the debt in full. The king knew that wouldn't happen, but he was so moved by the man's plea that he canceled the debt and let the man go free. Unbelievably, the man bumped into someone who owed him about a day's wages (he

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