

Wired for Relationships

We need deep associations with others, but often the challenges seem to outweigh the rewards. Here's how you can make healthy connections.

Each of us lives out our lives through a series of relationships. From our parents, to childhood friends, to our first love, our major milestones are framed by memories of our relationships along the way. We remember those who were present or influential at each stage of our lives and, no doubt, we also remember those who were not there to cheer us along.

What is it that makes some relationships thrive and stand through tests, while others falter and fail? I believe the keys to bettering and sustaining healthy relationships are to have a firm foundation in God, and to learn to communicate.

One powerful depiction of a faltering relationship is found in the Old Testament books of 1 and 2 Samuel. Although this example concerns a marital relationship, it can be applied across a wide spectrum of associations. The basic principles remain the same, regardless of with whom you are trying to build a relationship.

The love story of David and his wife, Michal, begins in 1 Samuel 18. Here we see the deep love of two people toward each other. Michal is the first love of David who was mentioned in the Bible. If you know the history of this couple, you will know that the erosion of their relationship occurred over a long period of time.

If you don't pay close attention to them, they will cause a serious rift that may take years to repair.

A Broken Connection – In 1 Samuel 18:20, we read that Michal

was given in marriage to David by her father, King Saul. Although this marriage was arranged, Michal loved David greatly; and he loved her.

Once David and Michal were married, she put herself in a tough position because of her love for her husband. Michal betrayed her father by telling David to get out of the city or he would be killed.

Like a modern day soap opera, 1 Samuel tells of David's plight as he becomes a fugitive running for his life, hiding out in caves as King Saul makes repeated attempts on his life.

Because King Saul has David on the run, Michal doesn't hear from him for long stints of time. Remember, there was no quick communication back then-no cell phones, no Blackberrys, no text messages. Nothing. Can you imagine her thinking, Does he still love me? Is he still alive?

As the story progresses, King Saul dies, and David is finally ready to ascend to the throne. However, David declares that he will not show his face until someone brings Michal to him (see 2 Sam. 3:13). For 16 years, David has focused on the call of God without compromise, and yet he was willing to give it all up for Michal.

Everything David had fought for, everything he risked his life for was on the line for Michal. So we see how very deeply David loved Michal, and we are never given any reason to doubt Michal's love for him.

Their love had withstood 16 years of stress, anxiety and separation. So, one would think that this marriage could not or would not fail, right? Not so! Even the strongest relationships can fall prey to insecurities and doubt if communication breaks down, and if God is no longer the center.

In 2 Samuel 6:16, we find that Michal made the choice to distance herself from the presence of the Lord (the ark of the

covenant). It is this decision that shook the very core of their relationship.

After all those years with limited communication, Michal and David still wanted desperately to be in relationship with each other. Yet, as soon as one of them chose to move away from God, all that they had worked for was placed in jeopardy.

The story goes on to describe how Michal witnessed David rejoicing before the Lord and mistook his praise as showing off for the ladies (see 2 Sam. 6:20). Had she still been in relationship with God, she easily would have been able to discern the reason for David's actions.

Scripture alludes to other factors that certainly contributed to the dissolution of David and Michal's union. However, if you compound all those years of poor communication with Michal's distancing herself from God, it was inevitable that their relationship would begin moving downward on a slippery slope.

When David and Michal were no longer in touch physically and in tune spiritually, their fellowship was irreparably broken. But it need not have been. Had they had time together and fellowship in the presence of God, their communication problems could have been addressed and adjustments made in the way they related to each other.

Keys to Effective Communication It is no secret that the key to effective relationships is good communication. In fact, you can greatly improve your relationships with others just by (1) listening to what others say before you speak or react and (2) learning how to handle disagreements.

Learn to listen. – Are you an effective listener? Research suggests that immediately after a conversation, a person remembers only half of what he or she has heard.

This is not because the listener has not had time to listen.

Most people are cable of comprehending at a rate of three to four times faster than normal conversation. The listener has plenty of time to hear and comprehend what he or she is being told. The challenge is in how the listener uses the extra thinking time.

What do you do while others are speaking? Are you listening attentively, or are you just awaiting your next opportunity to respond? Instead of planning your response, be a good, ready listener and do not answer until the other person is done speaking. Proverbs 18:13 says that he who answers before hearing all the facts brings “folly and shame” upon himself (NKJV).

Also, be slow to speak, and before you do, think first. Don’t be hasty with your words. Speak in a way that the other person can understand and accept what you say. Scripture says: “A man has joy by the answer of his mouth, and a word spoken in due season, how good it is!” (Prov. 15:23.)

Agree to disagree. – Another major issue of communication in relationships has to do with knowing how to handle differences of opinions. I have seen lifelong relationships end over one person’s inability to accept the other’s point of view.

But the Word of God says: “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers” (Eph. 4:29). When there is a difference of opinion, don’t respond in uncontrolled anger. Use a kind response and a calm tone of voice.

Also, “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice” (Eph. 4:31). Do not get involved in quarrels, fighting or disputing. It is possible to disagree without quarreling.

Don’t go to bed angry. Each day clear the offenses of that day. Speak the truth in love and do not exaggerate. “‘Be angry, and do not sin’; do not let the sun go down on your

wrath" (Eph. 4:26).

Often we have the expectation that there is only one way to see things, one way to act and one way to respond. This is a direct violation of God's creation of the uniqueness of an individual. It shows extreme self-centeredness.

A God-centered perspective understands and respects the uniqueness of others. This does not mean that one person may not be completely wrong.

The rightness or wrongness of something should be determined based on God's perspective. Achieving this perspective individually will lead to mutual understanding. And this is possible because "We have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16). The alternative is to embrace a self-centered approach that attempts to make someone else a clone of you.

Problems can arise when we insist on seeing issues strictly from our own biased perspectives. Sometimes we are so consumed with our need to unload what we are feeling that we fail to be sensitive to the feelings of others.

When you are wrong, admit it, ask for forgiveness and then ask for help in order to change. Solomon wrote: "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel is wise" (Prov. 12:15).

And if someone confesses a wrong to you, tell them that you forgive them and be sure it is forgiven. Do not bring it up again to that person, to yourself or anyone else.

Jesus said: "'Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him'" (Luke 17:3-4).

We were created to live and thrive together. Relationships are

more than a privilege of human existence; they are a necessity.

Connectedness Matters – The Bible teaches that as believers, we are in relationship with Christ, and therefore, joined to one another. Christ commands and provides for our unity (see John 17:22-23).

As members of His body, integrity in our relationships is crucial to our unity. The apostle Paul wrote: “Therefore, putting away lying, ‘Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,’ for we are members of one another” (Eph. 4:25).

God’s Word makes it clear that He blesses unity among believers. Unity means that we come into agreement with a person or a group and deliberately work together. Marriages, families, ministries, businesses, churches and friendships should be built on principles that make them one.

Paul urged the Ephesians to “walk worthy of the calling with which [they] were called, with lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1-3). This takes effort.

If you’ve ever been in a relationship with someone, you know human nature resists the command to be gentle and loving with people who are different from us. Though the words “bear” and “endeavor” refer to work, it goes against our pride to “bear” with other people in love and “endeavor” to keep peace, if there is no common denominator or shared destination. You must be connected with people who share your values and goals in life.

But Paul also said that we should try to understand others’ opinions for the sake of the unity of the body of Christ and make allowances for our differences. He wrote: “If there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy fulfill

my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself" (Phil. 2:1-3).

Our connectedness matters because God created us to be in relationship with Him and with one another. Our relationships are restored or torn apart based on each person's willingness to work at developing the skills that will help them communicate more effectively.

Sometimes the temptation to withdraw and avoid connecting with others is understandable. However, remaining centered on God's perspective and applying these simple tools for improving your communication will help you to restore broken relationships and begin new healthy ones today.

Don't disconnect. Make a conscious decision to open up your heart to those around you, to see them as God sees you and treat them as God treats you. This will take you a long way toward developing and sustaining healthy relationships. Now that's an investment worth making!

Read a companion devotional.

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