

Series: Living Together in Harmony, #8

Texts: Gal. 5:16-18; Eph. 4:25-27, 30-5:2;

Rom. 5:18-21 (The Message)

Valley Community Baptist Church

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Avon, CT

Pastor Jay Abramson

Preventing Relational Meltdown and Living in Hope

[Intro for drama: Hello, my name is Forgiven.]

We've been talking about all sides of relationships for the past seven weeks.

During at least one of these weeks we've probably all been convicted by God that while we may have been hurt by a relationship, we too have done some hurting. We're all guilty of relational sin. So, what do we do about that? Where do we go from here? That's what we need to talk about today. Please allow the message of this drama to speak God's truth to you about who you really are.

[Drama then prayer]

I. Caught in the Vicious Cycle.

Emerson and Sarah Eggerichs, who have given us such great insights about the needs of men and women, have another biblical insight that describes the reality of many relationships and especially many marriages today. They call it the Crazy Cycle. I call it the Vicious Cycle. It looks like this: [show Vicious Cycle diagram] A woman needs love in a marriage and if her husband doesn't treat her lovingly, she reacts by disrespecting her husband. A husband needs respect in a marriage and if his wife doesn't treat him respectfully, he reacts in an unloving way towards his wife and their relationship starts spinning around and around and around.

What does this look like in real life? Well, Emerson remembers how early in their marriage, one year he forgot Sarah's birthday. For most women, birthdays are a big deal but in Sarah's family they were a gigantic deal. So, Sarah's birthday was coming up and she was thinking how Emerson hadn't really made a very big deal about her birthday the year before, so she thought she'd try a little experiment. When birthday cards came from her family several days early, she hid them. In her mind, she wasn't doing anything evil, she was just trying to measure how special she was to her husband.

Emerson remembers it this way, "No hints of her birthday existed anywhere, and I was going along in my usual fog, studying and thinking. On her birthday I had lunch with a friend. That evening as Sarah and I had dinner, she softly asked, "So, did you and Ray celebrate my birthday today?" Guys, you been there?

Emerson continues, "I can't describe exactly what goes on inside the human body at a moment like that. But it felt as if my blood went out of my heart, down to my feet, and then shot full force into my face."¹ Every husband and wife here can imagine what the next few days felt like for both Emerson and Sarah. Emerson had acted in a very unloving way and Sarah was not quick to forgive. But when Emerson found out that Sarah had hidden all the other cards that had come, he also felt 'set up,' disrespected. Which caused him to be more unloving which caused Sarah to be more disrespectful. Now they were in the vortex of the Vicious Cycle. Is this sounding familiar to anybody?

The simple biblical truth is this, we can't eliminate all relational sin from our lives, even as Christians. That's what Gal. 5:16 is telling us:

So I say, live by the Spirit (literally, the Greek word here is *peripeteite*, walk by the Spirit), **and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.**

The Greek word for 'sinful nature' here is *sarx*, flesh. You can't get away from the sinful nature as long as you are in the flesh. Becoming a Christian doesn't eliminate sin from your life. Becoming a Christian is you declaring war on your sinful nature but you won't win the war until you are out of the flesh. So, every day for a Christian is a battle. Your choice every day is this, "Will I walk where the Spirit says to walk or will I walk where my 'flesh,' my natural, sinful nature say to walk?" If you aren't a Christian, you don't even have this choice! The non-Christian is totally controlled by their sinful, selfish nature. But being a Christian does NOT mean that you have eliminated sin from your life, far from it.

So, what can and should be done about this? We must choose to interrupt the Vicious Cycle. But how?

II. Find Freedom in the Grace Cycle.

Now, in the example of Emerson and Sarah, who sinned? Obviously, Emerson sinned by being insensitive to his wife's need for love on her birthday. There are sins of commission and sins of omission and this was a big-time sin of omission. But let me point out, **the Vicious Cycle can't start spinning until two people sin.** One sin can't start it. What if Sarah hadn't hidden the other birthday cards? Or, what if at dinner that night she had simply said, "Emerson, this day is very special to me. Do you know why?" And after the blood had returned to his heart and he had begged for forgiveness, what if she had allowed him to make it up to her with a diamond bracelet or some other appropriate peace offering, would their marriage have been strengthened or weakened? Do you see my point? The Vicious Cycle can't spin unless he withholds love AND she withholds respect. Whenever we are sinned against, we have a choice to take a ride on the Vicious Cycle or the Grace Cycle [show Grace Cycle diagram].

Which brings up the question, "But why?" "Why should I respect him if he is continually unloving to me?" Or, "Why should I love her if she is continually disrespectful to me?" There's a practical answer and a moral answer to that question. First of all, the practical answer. If you want to be loved, what type of environment do you believe is most likely to elicit loving behavior? Will verbal abuse, personal attack and disrespect elicit loving behavior? It's one thing to honestly communicate hurt or to privately point out wrong doing (Matt. 18), but a verbal attack of someone's character isn't likely to produce loving behavior the next time around.

I think we all realize the application of this with our children. If a child does an unloving thing to his brother or sister, what's the best strategy for extinguishing the unloving behavior and replacing it with loving behavior? If you take that child and scream at them and belittle them, condemning not just their behavior but who they are as a person, threatening to introduce them to pain like they've never known – does that work? Or, does that almost guarantee that the unloving behavior will NOT be extinguished but, in fact, it will increase?

This is what Eph. 4 is talking about when it says:

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. (Eph. 4:25-27)

This passage is telling us that being angry is not necessarily sinful. If we are sinned against or if we know someone else is being sinned against, it isn't wrong for us to be angry. God is angry about it! It's not wrong to be angry about sin. BUT anger is like the fire in your furnace. If it stays in the furnace, it heats your house. If it gets out of your furnace, it burns your house down. Anger can be used by God to motivate you to do good. William Wilberforce of Britain was angry about the slave trade for 30 years. He used that anger to motivate himself to work tirelessly in Parliament to see the slave trade dismantled. But Moses let his anger toward the slavery in Egypt burn out of control until he murdered a man and had to flee for his life, spending the next 40 years in exile in the desert. When someone sins against you, it's not wrong to be angry. It IS wrong and simply counter productive to let your anger cause you to sin in return. That sin lessens your chance of getting the love or respect that you need.

But there's also a moral reason why I should respect even when I'm not loved and why I should love even when I'm not respected. The moral reason is because Jesus said that this is required if you are going to be part of His kingdom. Nobody can force you to be part of His kingdom, but if you choose to be part of His kingdom, then you have to obey the laws of His kingdom and this is one of them. Let me remind you of what Jesus said:

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' (Old Hebrew law) But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles... (Matt. 5:38, 39, 41)

Why would Jesus make this a law in His kingdom? Because His goal is to extinguish sin and draw people into a life of mercy and grace. And what is it that extinguishes sin and draws people? Eph. 4:32 -5:2:

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, (*mimitai*, literally, mimics) therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Lev. 3 tells us that the Temple sacrifices were 'a pleasing aroma' to God. II Cor. 2:15 says that we are to God the aroma of Christ. What's the connection between the Temple sacrifices and Jesus Christ? They both were pierced, crushed and they carried someone else's guilt. **Isaiah 53:5:**

**But he was pierced for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The punishment that brought us peace was upon him...**

What's the aroma from our lives that most pleases God? The aroma of being crushed, pierced by someone else's sin and instead of returning sin for sin, we give grace for sin.

So, how do we break the momentum of the Vicious Cycle? "I forgot her birthday, so she forgot to tell me that Mike called with free tickets to the UConn game, so I 'inadvertently' deleted the e-mail from her sister, so she..." How do you break this cycle? **The Vicious Cycle is broken when one person brings grace into the relationship.** [Show Grace Cycle diagram again] That's what **Romans 5: 18-21** is explaining:

Here it is in a nutshell: Just as one person did it wrong and got us in all this trouble with sin and death, another person did it right and got us out of it.

But more than just getting us out of trouble, he got us into life! One man said no to God and put many people in the wrong; one man said yes to God and put many in the right.

All that passing laws against sin did was produce more lawbreakers. But sin didn't, and doesn't, have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call *grace*. When it's sin versus grace, grace wins hands down. All sin can do is threaten us with death, and that's the end of it. Grace, because God is putting everything together again through the Messiah, invites us into life – a life that goes on and on and on, world without end.

Have you ever received grace in a human relationship? Have you ever gotten what you DIDN'T deserve? Have you ever had someone meet your needs when you couldn't or wouldn't meet theirs? What kind of person does grace motivate you to be and become?

Gary Thomas tells a true story about remarkable grace given and received. Please watch:

[show Sacred Marriage DVD, Session 6, Begin at 14:53 run to end]²

How do we prevent relational meltdown? We interrupt the Vicious Cycle with the Grace Cycle. We pray that prayer that Gary mentioned every day, “LORD, help me today to love my friend, my child, my parent, my husband, my wife, like they have never been loved before and never will be loved again.” Let's pray...

¹ Dr. Emerson Eggerichs, *Love & Respect* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), p. 12

² Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage DVD* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), Session 6, 14:53 -20:01