

THE MARK

Learning to Love Like God

Remarkable Relationships (Part 1)

Text: 1 Corinthians 13

From Regular to Remarkable

I want to begin with you today a series of reflections on what the Bible has to say about building truly *remarkable relationships*. In the end, nothing matters more in life than the quality of our relationships. Isn't that so? We can have good looks, fine health, a steady job, even fame or fortune, but if we have not developed an ability to relate very well to God and the other beings around us, is this really success in the richest sense?

The truth, of course, is that a lot of us have grown accustomed, maybe even resigned, to *regular relationships*. Some of them are healthy enough for our purposes, but we've come to expect a fair amount of disappointment, frustration, and conflict in our connections with other people. We've gotten used to the emotional distance, the secret griping, the restless dissatisfaction that characterizes many of the relationships in our lives.

Now and then, however, we catch a glimpse of people who seem to have found something more. Maybe you see a marriage that is not simply surviving but truly thriving. Perhaps you witness an unusual intimacy between a parent and child. Maybe you admire the fabulous dynamic that seems to exist between members of a team, or best friends, or a set of siblings. It might even be an unusually life-giving link between a student and a teacher, coach, or mentor. When I see this kind of connection I often wonder: "What's going on there? How did those people get that kind of bond? And is it possible – is it *actually still possible* – for that kind of experience to become mine?"

God Is Our Pattern and Provider

God says: "It is and I can help you." No matter how difficult the relationship is now... No matter how far away a better experience seems to be... I can help you rise above the regular like a kite soaring above the clouds. It's not going to happen overnight, but I can provide the principles, practices, and power you need to lift you where you want to go.

This is the **FIRST** and most important principle the Bible lays down about progress in the quality of our connections with one another. The key idea is that GOD is our ultimate pattern and provider when it comes to building truly remarkable relationships.

“As I have loved you, so you must love one another,” (John 13:34) said Jesus. In other words, the way I relate to others is the pattern you need to study and imitate, says Jesus.

In fact, I (Dan) would go so far as to say that at the core of any great marriage, family, friendship, team, or mentoring relationship you will find people relating to one another in ways previously patterned or directed by God, even if the people in that circle don't recognize the Source. It is this particular way of relating that we're going to unpack together over the next several weeks. Are you up for that adventure?

God Calls Us to Grow Up

Before you answer too blithely, I have to warn you that the SECOND key to developing more remarkable relationships is a particularly challenging one and it gets described in our scripture text for today. Reflecting on the pathway that led him to the better life we have in mind, the Apostle Paul writes: **“When I was a child, I talked [and] thought [and] reasoned like a child. [But] when I became [an adult], I put childish ways behind me”** (1 Cor 13:11). What Paul is saying here is that if you are seriously interested in developing better relationships than you have today, then you need to grow up – you need to finish growing up.

In my clearest moments, I know this is true of me. Sometimes I think that the self that I bring to all my relationships is like a ball of kite-string that got tight and tangled back when I was young. We don't have time for me to describe all of the experiences that got me into this condition. You'd be bored by them. All I can say is that God keeps showing me that -- even as old as I am -- I am still very wound up in my perceptions of myself and others. I am still knotted tight in my ways of handling the people and problems around me. My current self is the string that limits the height of the kite of my relationships. I will never rise to the level of marriage, parenting, friendship, or leadership that I want, until I recognize more clearly those childish ways that are limiting my relationships and – with God's help -- put those ways behind me. This is the task for all of us. We've got to finish growing up.

A lot of people, of course, *think* they've already grown up. To paraphrase Paul in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 13 they think: “Look at what a great communicator I've become – the way I can talk, teach, and preach to others. Look at how knowledgeable I am about the Word of God and life. Look at my faithful attendance at church and my giving to the needy and all the sacrifices I've made.” Even many non-religious people measure maturity by how articulate, educated, faithful, or charitably active they are. These are, of course, very commendable qualities. We need more people with these qualities. But they aren't the measure of maturity in God's eyes. They are not what enable us to build truly remarkable relationships.

Love Is the Ultimate Mark of Maturity

Listen very carefully to this. It's the THIRD key principle I hope we'll grasp today: The ultimate mark of maturity – yours, mine, anybody's -- is the length and strength of the heart-string of love that runs out from ourselves into the lives of others. Jesus says that to love God and love your neighbor are the most important commandments of the Bible (Mrk 12:29-31). Paul says that love is the greatest gift and the first fruit of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:31, 13:12; Gal 5:22-23). It is the clear sign that the Holy Spirit is at work in us. The Apostle John says that the essence of God and of those people God truly indwells is love (1 Jhn 4:16). In fact, says Paul, I can be mature in all of the other ways this world values and certainly needs, **"but"** if I **"have not love"** -- if the preeminent quality I bring to the relationships of my life is not love, then **"I gain nothing... I am nothing"** (1 Cor 13:1-3).

Love Lasts Like Nothing Else

Either by point or counter-point, I am reminded of this every time someone's life comes to an end. As I've shared with you before, like most pastors, I spend a statistically unusual amount of time at funerals and gravesides. I've buried multi-millionaires and penniless people alike, but what is absolutely clearest in that moment we are putting their remains in the ground is that what mattered most about that person's life is not whether or not she or he was a good talker, a good thinker, a good religionist, or even a good citizen, as wonderful as those things are. What so obviously counts most in the end to everyone present on that day is the length and strength of the heart-string that ran out from that person's life. It is the way that person's love made him or her remarkable and lifted up the people around them – or didn't.

This is the FOURTH principle I want to lay down for us today and which the Bible so passionately declares: Almost everything else we spend our lives growing or constructing or chasing as the mark of success will cease, will be stilled, or will pass away. But love lasts like nothing else. If you want to make a lasting imprint on this world, sure, get a great education so that you can understand people, build a business that employs people, maintain a house that shelters people, give to causes that assist people but, above all else, resolve to put behind you whatever childish, selfish mindsets, addictions, or patterns of living that are hindering you from loving people like God loves you, because it will be this more than anything else that lasts.

Love Is Truly Re-Markable

Isn't this why Mother's Day means something to so many of us? Some of us were blessed to have a mother who loved us, however imperfectly, in a way that was something like the love of God that gets described in 1 Corinthians 13. She was often patient and kind to us when it must have been hard to be either. She was rarely boastful or proud about her accomplishments, but somehow took her greatest joy from

seeing us achieve. She was often selfless, slow to anger toward us, and amazingly able to forget the long list of times we simply got things wrong. She didn't delight in the evil that befell us as a consequence of our missteps, but rejoiced when we finally faced the truth. She protected us, she trusted God's work in us, she never stopped hoping for us, she persevered in her love for us. And it did not fail.

The love of our mother was not only remarkable in itself; it made a mark on us. It taught us something about how to love so that we could re-mark the lives of others with a love like this. And even if we did not know such love from a mother -- even if the absence of these qualities I've mentioned brings pain to our hearts -- it is only because we know so deeply how much every person desperately needs to be loved with a love like God's. So that's what we're going after together in these weeks ahead. We're going to find together those principles and practices, that very power of God, that can help us to grow up further than we have. Like the greatest Parent in the universe, God is going help us take that merely regular heart we may now have, those merely regular relationships we may now be in, and He's going to lift them to the level of remarkable, as we open ourselves to Him.

Would you do that with me as we come to Him now in prayer?

*Lord Jesus, you once gave your followers a new commandment: **"Love one another, as I have loved you"** (John 13:34). We thank you this day for the way you demonstrated that amazing love for people all through your earthly journey and so supremely upon the cross. We praise you that by your Holy Spirit, your love continues to move around and within us. We thank you for our mothers or anyone else who has been a conduit of your love in our lives. Now, fill us up afresh with Yourself we pray. Send us forth to love the people around us in a truly remarkable way. Amen.*