

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS: THE KEY TO FULFILLMENT

Introduction

Fulfillment in life comes when we build healthy relationships. God never intended for us to face life alone. In the beginning, Adam was created first to have a relationship with God and then to have a relationship with Eve. In the Garden of Eden, the first affect of sin was to separate Adam and Eve from God and then to destroy the relationships within the first family. The God-ordained relationship of marriage and family was impacted by sin with devastating results. Some may discount the Bible's teaching regarding creation and the fall, but no one can discount the fact that relationships are in serious trouble in America today. The dysfunctional family is undeniable proof that sin entered the human race, and the consequences of sin was passed on to all of us.

Recently while waiting in a doctor's office, a little baby girl about eighteen months old came toddling up to me with a smile and holding out some stickers for me to see. Her mother came chasing after her. The mother was a beautiful young girl who could not have been more than sixteen years of age. I fought back tears as I thought of the struggles these two young girls are going to experience in life, a mother and a daughter not more than fourteen years apart. How will they ever survive in a world that believes that healthy relationships are not necessary and may not be possible? Who is the father of the child? How is he coping with his responsibilities? Is he able to meet those responsibilities? Does he even care?

The evidence of dysfunctional relationships is everywhere. When I counsel young couples in premarital counseling, I notice a pattern. Whether they come from broken, dysfunctional homes, or stable homes, there is fear and uncertainty. They often doubt their ability to form enduring healthy relationships. Some do not trust themselves. Some do not trust the partner they plan to marry. How can they possibly achieve what so few are able to achieve today—a happy, healthy home? The situation is vastly more complicated if they have already engaged in premarital sex, if children have been conceived out of wedlock, or if they have already experienced a failed marriage.

The message that God wants each of us to hear is that it is possible to establish and maintain healthy relationships today despite sin and despite the cynicism of a world full of dysfunctional relationships. Healthy relationships do not happen simply because we are born into this world. Even when families do not fall apart, building healthy relationships is still difficult. Regardless of our experiences in the past, we can build healthy relationships. If we

have already violated the sacred bond of matrimony by engaging in practices that God declares to be sins against Him, against others, and against ourselves, this too can be overcome.

The Psalmist writes, “If you, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, that you may be feared. I wait for the LORD, my soul does wait, and in His word do I hope.”¹ It would be better if we could build relationships without the millstone of sin and guilt around our neck. For most of us, that is not an option because we already have this millstone necklace. Still, regardless of our sin and guilt, we can come to God and He will show us the way to build healthy relationships.

Hindrances to Building Relationships

It seems as if the world has discovered the importance of relationships. When we have a little money in our pocket or something else someone wants, the whole world tries to convince us we are related to them. The advertising industry exploits relationships to sell their products. Politicians try to convince us that they are somehow related to us to get our vote. Even churches promote relationships to attract new members. We need to be careful because many times the high-pressure sales pitch touting relationships is really manipulation rather than a sincere offer of goods and services. How many times do we fall for the sales pitch only to find that the product is defective and that when we need service the huckster who sold us the goods is already out of town?

Manipulation Hinders Relationships

Simply because we have something someone else wants does not mean that they have a relationship with us or that we have any responsibility to them. A good example is the telephone solicitor. He has a habit of calling and interfering with relationships that far exceed him in importance. People involved in television, radio, the Internet, and the ubiquitous telephone all tout themselves as bridges to help us build relationships. We are told that we can interact with the world through these mediums and build relationships all over the world. Supposedly it is part of the global mentality so popular today.

Because my ministry is in counseling and conflict management, I frequently receive email from individuals seeking counsel in how to deal with conflict in their lives. One individual contacted me by email to explain that her church and pastor were involved in a conflict. Over several weeks I continued to receive messages from her with questions that I tried to answer.

Gradually, however, I began to suspect that this person was not who she claimed to be. In the first few emails, she presented herself as an uneducated person who was simply concerned for her pastor and church. As the emails became more and more personal, I began to suspect that she was not as uneducated as she claimed. I insisted that if we continued the relationship, I would need to know that her husband was aware of our correspondence and approved.

Finally, I was asked to reveal some personal information that I did not feel she needed to know. As a hook, she revealed personal information to me about herself that may or may not have been true. I had no way of knowing. When I refused to disclose the information, she requested and did not respond as quickly as she expected, she became angry with me and sent a very terse message. In reply I explained that I had God-given responsibilities to fulfill in biblical relationships. I did not consider a relationship over the Internet important enough to supersede any of these relationships and in fact it was a very low priority. I went on to encourage her to reconsider her biblical relationships and her responsibilities in them. It was my intention to maintain a proper balance and I encouraged her to do the same.

I did not hear from her for some weeks. Finally, when I did, she dropped any pretense of being uneducated or in need of counsel. While I do not know to this day what her motives were, it is obvious that she was using me to achieve some personal gain. It may have merely been the process of building an Internet network. It may have been curiosity. It may have been far more sinister. Whatever her reason, I have not replied to her nor do I intend to until I am sure of the purpose and scope of that relationship and what my responsibilities before God are in it.

A relationship is not simply an easy tool to get something out of someone. If the relationship is genuine, all parties in the relationship will benefit from it. There is a lot of discussion about ways to motivate people. Often the last thing mentioned—if it is mentioned at all—is the on-going relationship between the motivator and the one being motivated. Motivation without a relationship is manipulation. As we will see later, a healthy relationship is one in which everyone in the relationship is willing to accept responsibility for the relationship with the expectation of sharing personally from that relationship.

Understanding the relationship between the motivator and the motivated is doubly true for young people today who lack the discernment to know when the one who claims to have a relationship with them is exploiting them. It seems like an acceptable part of life today to say and do anything to take advantage of others. Children need to be taught early in life to

recognize the difference between relationship, manipulation, and exploitation. Many never learn and suffer great harm in life. The greatest harm is the loss of trust in others that comes when an individual becomes aware that he or she has been exploited.

Self-centeredness Hinders Relationships

We often hear people talk of having a relationship with self. In this book what we mean by a relationship is the interaction between two or more people. In some contexts, it might be correct to speak of having a relationship with self but most of the time this is a misnomer. An over emphasis upon self—self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-concept—leads to a worship of self often referred to as “meism.” “Mesim” is the product of a false philosophy or world view. It may be an attempt to see ourselves as central to every issue as if we are the center of the universe and everything that happens in the world affects us, depends upon us, or benefits us. This self-centeredness is at the core of many problems in society today.

The nightly news cast fosters the attitude of “meism.” Newscasters tell us that we must stay tuned so that we can see and hear in living color and surround sound the latest earth-shaking event. When there is not enough hard news, they create news to fill up the time. This adds to the difficulty of discerning what is important and what is not. What is particularly disturbing is to hear them say, “you will only hear this late-breaking exclusive news coverage on our station.” In this way they portray us as the center of the universe, and they are right there with us making sure that we interpret the universe from their point of view.

This book is about building relationships with other people. We will see that our thought life and self-concept have a bearing upon our ability to build healthy relationships. We will discover that, if we constantly see ourselves at the center of every event in life, then our self-concept will be warped, and this will have a definite negative impact rather than a positive impact upon our relationships with others. The ideal would be to be completely selfless. This is not possible in this life but is a goal toward which we must all strive if we are to learn how to build healthy relationships.

Three Levels of Relationships

We are members of the human race and live in a community of human beings. If we are going to survive, we need to understand the nature of relationships, how to build healthy relationships, and what our responsibilities are in those relationships. Some relationships we enter into because of circumstances and others by choice. Technology has made it possible

to bridge the gap of time and space and to reach around the world. Technology can be a valuable tool for building healthy relationships, or it can destroy relationships. Therefore, we need to understand relationships in general, and then we need to enter into relationships with due care.

The starting point in building healthy relationships is to recognize that there are three levels of relationships. The first level is relationships of circumstance. We just happen to be in the same place at the same time. These relationships arise without our making a definite decision to enter into them. The second level is relationships of purpose. We have something in common with someone else and seek to accomplish some goal in partnership with him or her. These we enter into by choice. The third level is relationships of fulfillment. They are relationships in which we have learned to work through difficulties and conflicts to the point of success. We become partners moving in a positive direction together to accomplish the will of God. The commonality in each of these levels is that we have God-given responsibilities in every relationship regardless of the level.

Relationships of Circumstance

A relationship of circumstance might be a crowd of individuals at a movie theater. We have responsibilities even in such impersonal situations. For example, we owe it to each other to be courteous and considerate. How many times have you been in a public gathering with people who spoiled it for everyone else because of their rudeness? This demonstrates a lack of courtesy and consideration for others which is common among many in society, and makes it more and more difficult to feel comfortable in a crowd.

The importance of relationships of circumstance can be seen when we drive our cars 70 miles an hour down the highway. A lack of courtesy and consideration on the part of just one driver can be deadly to others on the highway. Society cannot function without basic relational skills and the acceptance of personal responsibilities in relationships of circumstance. Yet it has become sport among many today to be as discourteous and thoughtless toward others as possible. They think it is funny. If the trend continues, society will be destroyed.

I grew up believing that each member of society had a responsibility to other members of society to stay on the correct side of the road while driving and to respect the rights and personal property of others as well as public property. I once believed that if I looked out for the other guy, he would look out for me. This has all been turned upside down by a culture

that disdains such simple truth and laughs at anyone dumb enough to believe it. This mocking attitude is reinforced constantly through the media and at all levels of society. The media condemns those who “draw within the lines” as narrow and dull. We will look at some philosophies fueling this attitude in other chapters.

Relationships of circumstance are relationships we did not choose to enter into. We might wrongly assume that since we did not choose them, we should not be held accountable for them. However, God has defined our responsibilities in every possible relationship whether we chose those relationships or not. A good example of this truth is found when we realize that one relationship of circumstance is the relationship of a child to a parent.

We are usually not given a choice of parents. Yet God has made it clear that how we relate to our parents is important to Him and to us. In the Ten Commandments God commanded, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you.”² Paul reminded the church of this command. He wrote, “HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER (which is the first commandment with a promise).”³ Even though we do not choose our parents, God still holds us accountable for the way we treat our parents. In fact, how we treat our parents will have a profound effect on the course our lives will take.

Another important relationship of circumstance is that of a brother or sister. We usually do not have the privilege of choosing them but still have a responsibility to build healthy relationships with them. God does not place on us the responsibility of honoring them in the same way He does honoring our parents.

A relationship with a brother or sister is not as important as the relationship to a parent in God’s plan. A healthy relationship with a sibling can be beneficial. However, the need to get along and work through conflicts does not hold the same urgency as it does with parents. Time, distance, and circumstances may weaken the role a relationship with siblings plays in our lives with little impact upon us. This is not true regarding parents.

Even after we leave home to start a family of our own, our parents play a significant role in our family as role models for our children. Because of the breakdown of the family in America and because of mobility, the important role grandparents play in families has been overlooked. Also often overlooked is the impact the behavior of a child has upon a parent well into adulthood. When we choose a marriage partner, in effect we are choosing another family member to whom our parents will need to relate. This is why in the Old Testament and even in the New Testament, parents played a significant role in who their children married. We do not

have such conventionalities today and the choice of a marriage partner is often made even against the wishes and counsel of parents. When this happens, parents are faced with relationships of circumstance and the problems that arise from them.

This first level of relationships, relationships of circumstance, can be as binding upon us as any relationship in which we had a choice at the beginning. We need the guidance of God's Word to teach us what our responsibilities are in these relationships, and we need the power of God to meet these responsibilities.

Through the years I have had the privilege of working temporary jobs through temporary employment agencies. I came to view these experiences as opportunities to build relationships of circumstance. Those of us in full-time ministry often find ourselves far from the real world because our ministry confines us to working with Christians in Christian organizations with Christian goals. On the other hand, working in temporary job situations can often thrust us into unplanned situations.

When preparing to go out on a temporary assignment, I prayed that God would show me His divine appointment. By this I mean that I believe each time I took a temporary job, God had a plan for me to rub shoulders with someone whom I might never have met otherwise. This provided opportunities to witness to others through my relationship with them and to demonstrate the love of God to them. Through this type of work, I met several individuals who, by the end of my assignment, confided—some with tears—that they were my divine appointment.

John wrote about a trip that Jesus made to Galilee with His disciples. Concerning this trip, we read:

Therefore when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were), He left Judea and went away again into Galilee. And He had to pass through Samaria.⁴ (*Italics mine*)

The Greek term translated "He had to" in the last line is an important term. The term first means, "to bind."⁵ In some passages it has the idea of arresting and then binding as one in authority might bind a prisoner. Therefore, John tells us that Jesus was bound by divine authority to go through Samaria. The circumstances that led to this were because of the threat against Jesus that was beginning to develop in Judea which made staying there dangerous.

We are not told why Jesus chose the shorter route through Samaria to Galilee rather than going around Samaria by crossing the Jordan River, which was Jewish tradition. However, the fact that He stayed in the village two days suggests that haste was not the reason why He had to go through Samaria.

The best answer as to why He had to take the route He did was so that He could meet and could engage in a conversation the woman at the well and could lead the Samaritans to trust in Him. This fact underscores the reason why John included this event at this place in his gospel. John wanted to show that, while the Jews in Judea rejected Him, the Samaritans who were hated by the Jews received Him. They were His divine appointment.

Armed with this concept, we need to view relationships of circumstance as divine appointments. These may be opportunities to share Christ and to build relationships through which we can demonstrate the Christian life to a lost world. This is true lifestyle evangelism and is far more effective than any canned approach to sharing the gospel. Many times, it is an opportunity to encourage brothers and sisters in Christ in the marketplace in ways that can never be demonstrated at church on Sunday morning.

Looking back over my life with this concept of relationships of circumstance in mind, I can see how the hand of God was working in my life long before I ever understood who God is or how one enters into His family. There are many painful memories that could be roots of bitterness. However, looking back with this perspective causes the poison of bitterness and anger to drain away from the personal injuries sustained at the hand of others long ago. Like Joseph to his brothers, I can say to those who have inflicted pain upon me, “As for you, you meant evil against me, {but} God meant it for good.”⁶ For the believer, every relationship is an opportunity—a divine appointment—for good as we live out His plan for our lives. This thought does more to bring healing to my life than anything else I know.

Relationships of Purpose

In the second level, relationships of purpose, we find ourselves in situations where we expect something from each other beyond simple courtesy and consideration. We enter into these relationships by choice and by choice assume the responsibility for our part in the relationships. These relationships can be as simple as opening a bank account, acquiring a credit card, and buying a home in a particular neighborhood. Or they could be as complex as choosing a marriage partner, a business partner, or a church family.

Each of these is a relationship of purpose because we choose to enter the relationships. Often there are other individuals who choose to enter into the relationship also. The bank chooses to provide services for a price. The credit card company and mortgage lender choose to loan money with the expectation that the money will be paid back with interest. Each relationship of purpose should be viewed from the standpoint of mutual benefit and shared responsibilities. It is important to realize that what to us is a relationship of purpose because we choose to enter into it, to another person may be a relationship of circumstance because they do not have a choice. The relationship is forced upon them through no action on their part.

One important relationship of purpose is the sexual relationship. In God's plan the sexual relationship was given to provide enjoyment for those involved in it. But physical pleasure is not the only purpose. In fact, when we seriously consider its purpose for the point of view of the Bible, the responsibilities of each partner in the relationship are astronomical when compared to the single purpose of pleasure.

This fact is lost in the raging debate over abortion. One side claims the right to define sex as simply for pleasure while the other defends the rights of the unborn child. This issue will never be settled until the personal responsibilities of each individual are clearly understood and accepted.

Accepting responsibility means giving up something for the good of the other person(s) in the relationship. While this is true in every relationship, it is doubly true in the sexual relationship. Failure to identify, accept, and fulfill one's God-given responsibilities means the failure of that relationship. Even when our behavior in any given relationship is considered legal and acceptable by society, if it violates God's moral standards, the relationship cannot succeed. In fact, the Bible makes it clear that God will hold us accountable for our failure to fulfill the responsibilities He establishes for us in our relationships.

Solomon writing to his son reminded him:

Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things.⁷

Perhaps the most significant relationship in this second level, relationships of purpose, is that of a parent to a child. God has given adults the ability to choose when children will be born. Along with this choice comes the responsibility of caring for the child. To the child, it is

a relationships of circumstance. To the parents, it is a relationship of purpose. When viewed with this perspective, we see the tremendous impact relationships of purpose can have on relationships of circumstance.

Because of some erroneous philosophies believed in the world, the level of relationships of purpose has been blurred almost beyond distinction. We will be looking at three types of philosophies that affect relationships of purpose later in this book. Here it is important to note that the view we hold regarding these philosophies will profoundly affect the way we approach relationships of purpose.

Because of the cacophony of voices clamoring for their own particular philosophy, we must carefully study what our responsibilities are when we choose to enter into relationships of purpose. Young people need to be taught these responsibilities before they make decisions that affect their own life and the lives of others for years to come. One decision with the potential to alter the future for young people is the decision to enter into a dating relationship.

Dating is a relationship of purpose because it begins with a choice and a goal. Even if the perceived purpose is simply to have fun, a bond is being established. Patterns of communication are developed. The transition from a simple relationship to a more complex relationship with increased responsibilities is almost imperceptible. Without knowing it or intending for it to happen communication, upon which familiarity is based, is shared. The rules of the relationship and the attending responsibilities can change and either one or both partners could find themselves unprepared to fulfill those responsibilities. The results can be devastating not only to the couple, but also to every other relationship in which they have a part.

If both partners in the dating relationship understand its purpose and its limits and stay within the pre-established bounds, dating can be a rewarding experience. Therefore, it is so important for parents and their children to build positive healthy relationships and to teach their children how these relationships are established before dating begins. If this is not done, the dating years can become a nightmare for the whole family. When guidelines for any relationship are not established beforehand or are ignored, many other relationships will be harmed for years to come.

The fallout from violating the rules in relationships of purpose effect many other relationships. Others are drawn into and are affected by the choices we make in relationships of purpose. This extends to relationships of circumstance and unfairly impacts individuals

who have no choice in the establishment of these relationships but find themselves in positions of responsibility, and often in conflict situations, not of their choosing.

To illustrate the ripple affect in relationships, consider again the sexual relationship. Many more individuals are involved in this relationship than the two individuals seeking self-gratification. Even if steps are taken to prevent conception, when performed outside of marriage, the sexual relationship violates the rights and privileges of any future partner. Paul warned against such violation when he wrote:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification; {that is} that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; {and} that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is {the} avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned {you.}.⁸

From this we see that engaging in sex outside of marriage is a fraudulent act that robs someone else of what is due him or her. For the Christian, a sexual relationship outside of marriage also violates the relationship between the Christian and the Lord Jesus Christ. Concerning this we read:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be! Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body {with her?} For He says, “THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH.” But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit {with Him.} Flee immorality. Every {other} sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.⁹

Teaching young people how to enter into relationships of purpose, how to establish the goals and limits of these relationships, and how to stick to the pre-established rules of these relationships is critical in this day of personal freedom, free-sex, and alternative lifestyles. If one of the participants in the relationship of purpose does not hold to the same values as the other, the relationship becomes selfish and abusive and can lead to heartache for years to come and even for the rest of one’s life.

One of the important questions to ask yourself before deciding to enter into a relationship of purpose is do you have the resources to fulfill your responsibilities in this relationship? These types of relationships usually begin with some form of contract either written or oral. Relationships of purpose always require a change in our lives. Are we willing to make those

changes? Will we be happy with the changes once they are made? Often we cannot go back to where we were before we entered the relationship. Therefore, it is important to consider all aspects of the relationship before moving ahead.

Relationships of purpose also involve a commitment of time. Do we have the time to fulfill our obligations in the relationship? Are we willing to stay with the relationship for the agreed upon time until we have fulfilled our responsibilities in it? This is especially true when entering into long term relationships such as marriage or when assuming the role of a parent because these relationships last a lifetime.

Relationships of Fulfillment

The third level of relationships is relationships of fulfillment. These are relationships that may have begun as either relationships of circumstance or relationships of purpose and through time bring personal fulfillment and enrichment to our lives. Not all relationships of circumstance or purpose become relationships of fulfillment. Simply accomplishing a goal or fulfilling a contract does not produce the kind of fulfillment in life to which we are referring. This type of fulfillment is richer and deeper. Relationships of fulfillment take time, energy, and personal attention.

Over time conflicts arise in any relationship. Not all conflicts are due to sin. Some conflicts may simply be differences of opinion, preference, or goals. Even when the conflict does not begin as sin, if the conflict is not managed well, it will most certainly result in sin by individuals on one or both sides of the conflict.

A relationship of fulfillment is one in which the parties have learned to work through the conflicts to achieve a common goal for mutual benefit. These could also be called relationships of achievement. However, not all relationships that achieve an end can be characterized as relationships of fulfillment. The difference is that some relationships achieve goals that do not produce fulfillment. Paying off a five-year contract on a vehicle for instance might bring a sense of accomplishment. Yet in the end we are left with a worn-out car that needs to be replaced. The fulfillment we are talking about here is the joy of being able to accomplish a goal together and to enjoy the benefits of that accomplishment together. To accomplish the goal, those involved in the relationship had to change, to exert effort, to expend personal resources and time, to give and take. In the example of buying a car, the benefit to the relationship while achieving this goal together will last long after the car is worn out and gone. When we reach the level of fulfillment in one relationship, we are better able to

reach the level of fulfillment in others. Therefore it is important to teach these principles to our children early so that they can begin to develop the skills that will help them lay a foundation for relationships of fulfillment for the rest of their lives. Paul wrote:

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. {Instruct them} to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.¹⁰

The world teaches that fulfillment comes through acquiring material wealth. Instead, fulfillment comes through meeting the needs of others. Learning to serve others is the best foundation we can possibly lay for the future. In the last sentence in this passage, Paul uses a phrase that could be translated “fulfillment” when he describes the goal, which is to “take hold of that which is life indeed.” A paraphrase in today’s vernacular could be, “Man, that’s really living.”

Some relationships of purpose never reach the level of fulfillment because there are roadblocks that frustrate those who are involved in the relationships. Sometimes a lack of fulfillment occurs when expectations are too high or there is a failure to understand the relationship before entering it. Other times a lack of fulfillment could be due to a change in circumstances beyond our control—a failed business venture, a drop in the stock market, loss of a job, accidents, or failing health. Yet the new circumstances do not automatically absolve us of our responsibilities. Nor do the new circumstances mean that achieving fulfillment is not possible. What these usually mean is that we are forced to work together to adjust to the changing circumstances. When we can do this, our mutual achievements in overcoming these obstacles are most often what brings the greatest fulfillment in our relationships. Therefore, James writes:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have {its} perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.¹¹

Arriving at a level of fulfillment in our relationships through the wise decisions we make growing out of our faith in Christ brings the greatest glory to God. This is true when we learn to walk in the Spirit individually and corporately and to apply His Word to our relationships. In Galatians 5:16 we are exhorted to “walk¹² by the Spirit.” This refers to individuals making each

decision in life under the control and direction of the Holy Spirit. In Galatians 5:25 we are exhorted to “walk¹³ by the Spirit.” Here the meaning is to march together as soldiers march in rank. This refers to walking corporately, keeping in step with each other as the Holy Spirit through the Word of God calls cadence.

Forgiveness is also an important factor in achieving fulfillment in our relationships. When we offend each other, we weaken our relationship with each other. When we forgive each other and come to the place of genuine reconciliation, then the relationship becomes stronger than it was before the conflict. If we refuse to forgive or to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with each other, then we not only weaken that relationship, we also diminish our ability to achieve fulfillment in other relationships because we establish a pattern of unforgiveness. We become irreconcilable.¹⁴

Relationships of fulfillment are based upon our freedom in Christ and not upon rules and regulations. It is important to understand the context of Galatians Chapter 5 in this discussion of relationships of fulfillment. The book of Galatians was written to refute the false teachers who came after the apostle Paul and who were teaching that to be saved a person had to keep the law. Many today falsely teach that relationships must be based upon law. Paul corrects this by stating that laws are for children too young to know how to make correct choices.¹⁵ Those who accept Christ as Savior and who thereby received the indwelling Holy Spirit are set free from the law as a means of controlling behavior. Instead, choosing to walk in the Spirit and allowing the Spirit to control us dictates our behavior. The Holy Spirit will never lead us to choose to do that which is unlawful. This is what it means to live above the law.¹⁶

The level of fulfillment in a relationship can only be achieved through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us to take our minds off ourselves and to choose to serve others in that relationship. This is probably the greatest failure of “meism.” A self-centered person does not see himself/herself as serving others. He/she is only thinking about self and self-gratification. On the other hand, walking in the Spirit enables us to come to a place of selflessness. Paul writes:

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only {do} not {turn} your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the {statement} “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”¹⁷

It is important to teach and model the lifestyle of walking in the Spirit to our children and to new believers. A lack of understanding in this area leaves many frustrated and empty because they do not achieve fulfillment in their relationships.

Relationships of fulfillment are not only fulfilling to those of us involved in these relationships here on earth. They are also fulfilling to God the Father because, as a part of His vineyard, we are now bearing the fruit of righteousness as branches of His vine.¹⁸ They are fulfilling to the angels who surround the throne of God. They are fulfilling to Jesus because His death on the cross for us has now borne fruit in our lives.

Putting Responsibility Back into Relationships

While we will not achieve fulfillment in every relationship, both relationships of circumstance and relationships of purpose have the potential of reaching the level of fulfillment. Whether a relationship is one of circumstance or purpose, we must consider our responsibilities in the relationships for it to succeed. We will never achieve fulfillment in our relationships until we fulfill our responsibilities in those relationships.

When I accepted Christ as my Savior, I entered a relationship of purpose with Jesus Christ. He on His part promised to save me and He did. However, I did not understand some of my responsibilities in this relationship, so there were many times when I did not hold up my part of the bargain. Please understand that I use this colloquialism knowing that my salvation was by grace and grace alone. What I mean is that the relationship with Jesus Christ into which my salvation brought me involved responsibilities on my part of which I was not aware.

Two years after my decision to receive Christ as my Savior, several individuals questioned my salvation because of my lifestyle. I still had some of the bad habits I acquired before I entered into this relationship of purpose. In the beginning I was concerned about my eternal destiny. I did not want to go to hell. I had a whole list of things I wanted Jesus to do for me, but I did not understand what He wanted from me. John spells out one of these when he writes, “You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.”¹⁹ Paul adds, “For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.”²⁰

Here we see an important principle governing relationships, particularly relationships of purpose. Very quickly we encounter personal responsibilities that we never anticipated. Therefore it is so important to stop and consider what might lie ahead when choosing to enter into relationships of purpose. Once the choice has been made, we assume the obligation to fulfill our responsibilities in the relationship even if we did not know what those

responsibilities were before we chose to enter into it. Failure to meet our responsibilities means a failed relationship.

Marriage begins as a relationship of purpose. Most of us enter into marriage hoping our partner will meet our needs. What we need to realize is that of greater concern is if we will be able to fulfill our responsibilities to meet our partner's needs. Paul points this out when he writes:

Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband {does;} and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife {does.} Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.²¹ (*Italics mine*)

Notice the little words, “duty” and “authority” repeated twice in this section. One time I was teaching this passage to an adult Sunday school class. After class, an older woman came up to me and said she was offended by the terms “duty” and “authority.” She said that if her husband ever said it was her duty, she would tell him to get lost. No amount of explanation could persuade her to change her attitude.

This is true of so many individuals who enter into relationships of purpose without forethought or who rebel against the teaching of God's Word. Sometimes we have nothing left to hold on to in a relationship other than it is our duty. The trials of life can rob us of the joy of a relationship. Interpersonal conflicts will also rob us of joy. But when we work through those conflicts to our mutual benefit and forgive each other for offenses committed and achieve true reconciliation, then we enter a new level of experience in the relationship. It becomes a relationship of fulfillment.

When it is possible to reach fulfillment in a relationship, we need to do this. Failure to do so will affect every other relationship. Peter makes this clear when he exhorts:

You husbands in the same way, live with {your wives} in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.²²

Failure to achieve fulfillment in marriage means failure in our relationship with God. John makes a similar point when he writes, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.”²³

There is one final thought regarding relationships of fulfillment before we conclude this section. Remember our discussion earlier regarding Jesus’ trip through Samaria and John’s statement that He had to go through Samaria. We noted that the Greek term “*deo*” in the context means “divine appointment.” We find this term again in another unique context. The situation was conflicts among church members at Corinth, particularly in the way they were observing the Lord’s supper. Paul writes:

But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you.²⁴
(Italics mine).

Notice the phrase in the last sentence, “For there must also be.” *Deo* is the same Greek term found in the passage regarding the woman at the well. Here it has the same meaning, “Divine appointment.” Does this mean that God is behind many of the conflicts in churches today? I believe, when we understand this in the right way, the answer is yes. God allows conflicts to come into our lives to mature us. This is what James meant when he writes that trials make us “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”²⁵

In the Old Testament God repeatedly warned Israel that violation of His law would bring conflicts with their neighbors. In the book of Proverbs, we read, “When a man’s ways are pleasing to the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.”²⁶ In another passage we read:

Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, so that the violence done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal might come, and their blood might be laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who strengthened his hands to kill his brothers.²⁷

From this we see that failure to respect others in our relationships and acting irresponsibly may lead God to intervene and bring back upon us the results of this failure.

In the passage in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul was telling the Corinthians that God was at work in their midst allowing conflicts to sift them so that He could produce a cleansed and pure church. This does not mean that we should set out to stir up trouble so the church can be purified. Nor does it mean that we are automatically the “approved” ones simply because we believe we are right and others are wrong. What it means is that God is personally involved in our lives and the life of the church. Therefore, we need to take care lest we find ourselves in opposition to Him and what He is trying to accomplish. Church conflicts can be opportunities to enter new and more fulfilling relationships than would be impossible without the conflicts. This is true provided we apply the Scriptures to our lives and walk in the Spirit as He commands.

It is a sad commentary on our society that so many individuals never achieve the level of fulfillment in relationships that God intends. Christians do not seem to have a much better track record in this regard. Christians experience almost as many divorces as the general population. Churches fail to reach the level of fulfillment in relationships among its members. Many individuals become fearful of relationships altogether. Failure breeds failure. America is becoming a society marked by failed relationships. Each succeeding generation becomes more dysfunctional than the generation before with ever increasing speed and magnitude. If we do not put on the breaks and turn around, we will surely be facing chaos in the streets. Some might say we have already reached that point when children are killing children in our nation’s public schools.

I pray to our heavenly Father that this book will lead many to some answers on how to help turn the tide. If God chooses not to allow the tide to turn, and He may do that, at least maybe you who are reading this book will be challenged to find answers in God’s Word to help you improve the relationships in your life.

Building Relationships Biblically

There is an important principle that I live by and try to convey to those I teach. It is the principle that I do not go back and examine past decisions in the light of present knowledge. What this means is that before deciding to enter into relationships of purpose I seek God’s will from a study of His word, I seek wise counsel, and I sit down and count the cost. Then I make the decision. I make the decision with the attitude that this is God’s will for my life. Many times, things do not work out the way I expect even when I weigh the issues carefully beforehand. If I sought His counsel on the matter and I trusted Him to provide the wisdom I

needed to make the decision and to provide the resources to fulfill my obligations in that relationship, I cannot go back to the starting point where I was before I made the decision. I am obligated to fulfill my part of the bargain. The passage of Scripture I based this on is James 1:2-8. James writes:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have {its} perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, {being} a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.²⁸

In applying this passage to our present discussion, the trials represent those unforeseen conflicts that arise from the decisions I have made when I entered into a relationship of purpose. Whenever we enter into a relationship of purpose, we are agreeing to certain obligations which we accept by entering into it. In a sense, we are obligating God as well since we are placing our trust in Him to give us the ability to fulfill our responsibilities.

If we have done our homework before entering into the relationship and if things do not turn out the way we planned, we have the assurance that the trial is from God and His purpose in allowing the trial is for our good. It is an opportunity to cry out to God for wisdom regarding that trial and to rest in the assurance that He will work everything out according to His honor and glory.

Many enter into relationships of purpose without considering the responsibilities and consequences of those relationships and without seeking God's will. Then when things go wrong, they blame God. When they do this, they become doubleminded and unstable because of their own failure. Their troubles are compounded when they go back and examine those decisions in the light of present knowledge and fail to acknowledge their own culpability in bringing those trials upon themselves.

As we have seen before, one of the most important relationships of purpose we can enter into is marriage. We do not know and cannot know all the ramifications of that decision when we make it. Yet we can, through seeking God's will revealed in His Word, through the leading of the Holy Spirit, and through listening to wise counsel, make such a decision with confidence. This confidence does not guarantee that things will always work out according to

our expectations. Many times, they will not. Any time we enter into long-term relationships of purpose we do not know in advance what the end will be. But when we experience trials, we can have a clear conscience that the trials are not the result of failure on our part. It may be that God intended all along to allow a different outcome than we expected for our good. To those who enter into relationships of purpose responsibly God has promised, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to {His} purpose.”²⁹

Jesus is called “the Alpha and Omega.”³⁰ This means that even though we do not know what the future will bring, He does. Faith in Him when entering into relationships of purpose is absolutely imperative. Prayer is vital as well. John writes:

And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us {in} whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.³¹

Notice that John is writing to individuals who “believe in the name of the Son of God.” Since they believe, they must also have the Son. If they have the Son, they must also have eternal life. Eternal life is a quality relationship with God that will last for eternity. So why does John have to write and tell them they have eternal life? The answer is because things can happen in our relationship with God—in this context it is called sin—that disrupts the enjoyment of that relationship. It is possible to have a relationship with God and not feel like we have it because of the barriers that we have allowed to come between God and us. This is also true of our relationship with each other, whether it is a relationship of circumstance or of purpose.

The good news is that even though we do not know what barriers may come that might hinder our relationships, we still can enter them with confidence because Jesus is the Alpha and Omega. Nothing will surprise Him. When we do our homework and examine our relationships of purpose before we enter into them, when we commit ourselves to fulfilling our responsibilities in all of our relationships, and when we put our trust in Christ, then we do not have to look back with regret even if barriers do come and we are not able to complete fulfillment. We can pray about those barriers and ask God to do His will either by helping us to

overcome the barriers or by helping us to learn to live with them. Then even if God does not answer the prayers the way we want Him to, we still can have the assurance that our prayers are being answered according to His will.

The need for truth in relationships

Building godly relationships is possible only when both parties in the relationship are committed to truth. This seems so basic that we often overlook this important aspect of building relationships. Yet is this not the very thing that destroyed relationships in the Garden of Eden? The first thing that happened was that the truth of God's Word was called into question. Then a lie was told about that truth. Finally, the truth itself was ignored altogether and Adam and Eve attempted to build their relationship upon a lie. We will be looking at this matter in depth later. Here it must be underscored. Any attempt to build a relationship must begin with laying a foundation of truth.

The illustration of the wise man who built his house upon a rock is familiar to many. It is found in Matthew 7:24-29. Luke records a similar illustration that Jesus taught but the details and application are different.

Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and acts on them, I will show you whom he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock; and when a flood occurred, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who has heard and has not acted {accordingly} is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great.³²

As with the illustration in Matthew's gospel, the rock here is Jesus Christ who calls Himself "the way, the truth, and the life."³³ We need to establish all of our relationships upon the foundation of the truth of God. Only then can we ever expect to achieve fulfillment in those relationships.

Avoiding "Us and them" thinking

We have seen that the goal is to reach the third level—the level of fulfillment—in our relationships. We have also seen that this may not be possible either because of the kind of relationship it is or because of a failure on the part of others in that relationship. Often this lack of fulfillment leads us to feel as if we do not have a relationship with others with whom we

are involved and therefore we do not have any responsibilities to them. In turn this can lead to an “Us and them” attitude. “Us and them” thinking occurs when we begin to focus on what divides us more than what unites us.

When delineating principles of conflict management, most agree that there cannot be any effective solutions to conflicts without first recognizing that there is a valued relationship between the opposing sides in the conflict. Whether we are religious or secular, Christian or some other religion, if we engage in “Us and Them” thinking, we will never be able to work together to find solutions to our problems. When we embrace faulty views about our relationship to each other, we undermine the very fabric of society and perpetuate hatred in society.

We do not have to agree on every aspect of life to agree upon solutions to our conflicts. It is not our differences regarding race, ethnicity, or even religion that produce the disastrous results seen at Columbine High. It is our failure to see what unites us as members of the human race. Whether we like it or not, we all live on this planet. We all are affected by the dysfunctionality of society. The fact that we can now view conflicts in society anywhere in the world at any moment demonstrates how important it is to identify how we are related to each other and how we can use these relationships to change society for the better.

The Christian church historically has failed society by engaging in “Us and Them” thinking. This kind of thinking has caused the church to fail in delivering its message, in presenting the gospel of peace, and in accomplishing its mission of bringing people together to serve a risen Savior. The fact that there is one human race is evident everywhere in the Bible. Therefore, there is solidarity among all races and ethnic groups regardless of religious persuasion. We are related. Jesus taught regarding this solidarity when He commanded His disciples:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.’ “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on {the} evil and {the} good, and sends rain on {the} righteous and {the} unrighteous.”³⁴

Paul taught this solidarity when he referred to “the kindness of God our Savior and {His} love for mankind”.³⁵ This is a beautiful word picture in the Greek language in which it was written. The phrase, “love for mankind.” translates one Greek word, philanthropia. This term is made up of two words, philo meaning love, and anthropia referring to the human race. It is

transliterated into the English language as “philanthropy.” More is going to be said about the Greek term, *philos*, in the last section of this book. Here it is helpful to see that *philanthropia* is an attitude of warmth and affection for the human race, referred to as *anthropos*. How would history over that past 2,000 years have been changed if the Christian church had always had this attitude toward all mankind?

It is interesting that most Systematic Theology books have a section titled, Anthropology. In theology anthropology is a systematic study of what the Bible teaches regarding the human race. Usually authors emphasize the differences of opinion among scholars regarding views of the human race and seldom mention the similarities of opinion. So far, most anthropologists believe there is only one human race. What would happen if we all listed the areas of agreement and forgot for a moment the areas where we disagree? Perhaps it would be possible to arrive at some agreement that we are all related and because of this relationship we can discuss some of the social issues we all face because of our relationship to each other and together we could discover some solutions that will benefit us all.

Given God’s attitude of loving affection toward the human race and the command given to Christians to love every member of the human race (even loving our enemies as God loves them), every Christian should be a philanthropist in the true meaning of that word. As God blesses all of us by causing the sun to shine and the rains to fall upon everyone,³⁶ so Christians should seek to provide the basic necessities of life to everyone as much as possible.

Paul underscores this same thought when he commands the churches, “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.”³⁷ From this verse we see that even though our first responsibility is to take care of the household of faith, we still have a responsibility to all people. This implies that we are related to every other member of the human race and, therefore, share in the responsibility to participate in caring for the needs of the human race.

In another passage we find that the human race shares something else in common, that all men have been created in the image of God. Because of this we need to be careful what we say about each other and how we communicate with each other. James wrote:

So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and {yet} it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the {very} world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of {our} life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species

of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; {it is} a restless evil {and} full of deadly poison. With it we bless {our} Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God.³⁸

This leads us to something else we need if we are going to be a part of the solution and not a part of the problem in society. We need to learn how to communicate with each other whether we are related by circumstance or purpose and whether we ever reach a level of fulfillment in our relationships. In fact, we will never achieve relationships of fulfillment without becoming effective communicators in our relationships.

¹ Psalm 130:3-5.

² Exodus 20:12.

³ Ephesians 6:2.

⁴ John 4:1-4.

⁵ W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., eds., Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 66.

⁶ Genesis 50:20.

⁷ Ecclesiastes 11:9.

⁸ 1Thessalonians 4:3-6.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 6:15-18.

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

¹¹ James 1:2-4.

¹² The Greek word, peripateo.

¹³ The Greek word, stoicheo.

¹⁴ Cf. 2 Timothy 3:3.

¹⁵ cf. Galatians 4:1-3.

¹⁶ cf. Galatians 5:18 w. 5:23b.

¹⁷ Galatians 5:13-14.

¹⁸ John 15:1ff.

¹⁹ I John 3:5.

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:20.

²¹ 1 Corinthians 7:1-5.

²² 1 Peter 3:7.

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- ²³ **I John 4:20.**
- ²⁴ **1 Corinthians 11:17-19.**
- ²⁵ **James 1:4.**
- ²⁶ **Proverbs 16:7.**
- ²⁷ **Judges 9:23-24.**
- ²⁸ **James 1:2-8.**
- ²⁹ **Romans 8:28.**
- ³⁰ **Revelation 1:8; 21:6; 22:13.**
- ³¹ **I John 5:11-15.**
- ³² **Luke 6:46-49.**
- ³³ **John 14:6.**
- ³⁴ **Matthew 5:43-45.**
- ³⁵ **Titus 3:4.**
- ³⁶ **Matthew 5:45.**
- ³⁷ **Galatians 6:10.**
- ³⁸ **James 3:5-9.**