

### **“Relationship Challenges”**

Our sermon series on Ephesians is entitled "Gifted." This morning we are talking about being gifted with a family. Virtually everyone knows what family life is like, and will not be surprised that the title of this message is "Relationship Challenges." Let's start with the optimistic words of Isaiah (43:16-21) and then look at the challenges presented in the Gospel and second lesson this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent.

"This is what the LORD says . . . 'Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!'" God is making a way. This is Lent. We are very close to Holy Week. This lesson is here as an encouragement.

When it comes to relationships, dwelling on the past can be very harmful. Very harmful! The existence of sin in the world has caused a great deal of things that are negative. In relationships negatives include hurt, anger, and a whole lot of self-centered behavior. While the original meaning is different, the advice of the Lord is apropos. ". . . do not dwell on the past."

Good advice in relationships. Good advice in life. Good advice from a spiritual point of view because Isaiah was right – God would do a new thing, and God has done a new thing. God's Son came into this world for that precise reason. What God has done is to remove sin, through forgiveness, through the cross, so that you and I have a new lease on life, and so that our relationships can be positive, rather than negative.

The gospel lesson shows the brokenness between God and people because of sin in the world. God created. He chose people. He's given them everything they need. And He expects some fruit. God has not just created without expectation. He wants a relationship, and He wants recognition and obedience.

The story Jesus tells is clear. There was a vineyard owner. He was an absentee landlord, leaving his vineyard in the hands of tenants. When it was time for his share of the harvest, they refused. The owner sent his son. Him they killed.

Jesus, of course, was telling the story of God, the world, the Jews, and the sending of Jesus. He ends with the statement, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed." Here, then, is the Hope that mends the broken relationship. The repentant person, the person broken to pieces because of the realization of his or her sin, will receive forgiveness and eternal life. Others will simply be left in their fallen state.

Jesus is the capstone. Jesus is the One who forgives, who restores, who empowers the relationship. Jesus is the One who now expects those who follow Him to be responsible in their relationships in life, beginning with those in their families.

In Ephesians we've talked about being gifted with salvation, with eternal life, with being included in God's family. In chapter 5 we are talking specifically about family

relationships. This is the chapter that is used to talk to men and women in pre-marriage counseling. It is about relationships.

Paul begins by encouraging us to be imitators of God, living a life of love. If our relationship with God is the result of His reaching out to us in love, then our relationship with others should be the result of our reaching out in love to them. The problem, you see, with those guys in the vineyard, was that they were just in it for themselves. The Christian faith is just the opposite of sin, which is self-centered living. The Christian faith is about a relationship with God that results in relationships with others. Imitating God, we are to live a life of love.

Paul continues, "Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity . . ." O.K. Here's where the rubber meets the road. We are to imitate God. We are to live a life of love. We are to make the most of every opportunity. We are to do all this because God has first of all rescued us through the cross of Christ.

Here's where the rubber meets the road because even though we are saved, we still are saints and sinners. The tug of sin in our lives urges us to be self-centered, rather than other centered. This is a huge problem.

With the filling of the Holy Spirit, and a change of heart and mind, we can have a go at it. Now . . . what follows is radical when seen from the point of the world, when seen from the point of our natural inclinations, and when being tempted by the devil. Those three enemies have been defeated by Christ, however, so even though the next thoughts are alien to the enemies (Satan, world, flesh), they are meaningful to the Christian.

"Make the most of every opportunity." It needs to start in the home. And if there's a marriage, it needs to start with husband and wife. And, I might add, neither, from the point of view of his or her sinful nature, will be too happy about what Paul has to say!

Starting with 5:21, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." There you have it! Simple. But not easy. Christians are to continually prefer the thoughts, opinions, and desires of others. Beginning at home. This is difficult. This can be done only by being so secure in God's grace, that everything else is secondary. "My grace is sufficient for you."

Then a few details as to how this is to work. Wives are supposed to respect their husbands. She is to submit to him. Not a popular idea. And not if they earn respect. Wives are simply commanded to give the respect. Wives might be very surprised at changes in their men, if they truly look to them for leadership, and value them.

Husbands are to love their wives. Now this is not as simple as it sounds. How are they to love them, ". . . as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her . . ." Husbands are simply commanded to sacrifice themselves for their wives – to put them before they put themselves. There – now the challenge is equal. Now both instructions have the same implications. Give of yourself for the other person.

This message is titled "Relationship Challenges" simply because all of this is a challenge. This is so different from our natural inclinations. However, all of this is also rewarding. When Jesus told us to love each other as we love ourselves He was sharing a spiritual principle that will enhance our lives just as it enhances the lives of people we love.

This also includes forgiveness. We forgive as God has forgiven us.

The same principles spill over into our other relationships in life, whether they are in the home, in the neighborhood, at work, or any place else. God has gifted us with people in our lives. We are instructed to use whatever other gifts we have in life to take care of them

There may be relationship challenges, but by the power of God, those challenges can turn into blessings.

Cherish your family relationships. Be the one to bring God's love and forgiveness into all situations.